

THOMAS ALVA EDISON

Inventor of the light bulb

Speaking parts: narrator, Thomas Alva Edison, Mrs. Edison, teacher, neighbor, train owner, businessman, Mary, worker

Non-speaking parts: other workers in Edison lab

Props: a fake plant of some kind, some jars, a cucumber and a carrot, a BOOM! sign, play money, couple of fake flowers for a wedding bouquet, paper cups and plates on a tray, taped organ music (if possible), oatmeal can with foil taped around it, a funnel, a cassette tape with this recorded on it: "Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow," a fake beard (if possible)

Production note: Directions are not given for when actors and props are to be on and off the "stage" area (you certainly don't need a stage!). The director can suggest the appropriate comings and goings on and off the stage area as he/she sees fit. You may want the narrator on stage all the time, or on only when lines are being read. It is up to the director's discretion. Feel free to add or subtract little details to make the performance more your own, also!

NARRATOR: When Thomas Alva Edison was a boy, he went by his middle name. Everyone called him Al. Al was a character right from the start. His curiosity often led him into trouble. When he was six years old he set his family's barn on fire just to see what would happen

MRS. EDISON: Al, get away from the fire! I'll get some buckets. Oh, I do hope you're not like this in school!

NARRATOR: Yes, he was like this in school. His main fault was that he asked too many questions.

TEACHER: So, you see, class, that plants need the light from the sun to be able to grow.

AL: Aren't there some plants that can grow indoors, without direct sunlight?

TEACHER: Yes, I suppose there are, but they do still get indirect sunlight, so my point holds.

AL: What if the sun went out, then someone would have to invent some other source of light or else we'd all be in the dark all the time.

TEACHER: Don't be silly, Al. The sun won't ever go out.

AL: How do we know that? And if it did, someone would have to invent something that made light, right? I mean not like a fire, that's too dangerous to have in your room.

TEACHER: Please, can we get back to our lesson on plants now?

AL: Why do we have to study plants, anyway?

NARRATOR: Al's teacher complained to Mrs. Edison that Al was unruly in class.

TEACHER: Mrs. Edison, you've got to do something about your boy. He does nothing but pester me with questions. If you ask me, I'd say he was a bit addled. *(As teacher says "addled" he points to his head gesturing "crazy.")*

MRS. EDISON: There's nothing wrong with my son. He's a bright boy and obviously too intelligent to be in school. I think I'll teach him myself!

NARRATOR: So Mrs. Edison took Al out of school and began teaching him at home. She introduced him to great literature, like Shakespeare and Dickens, and allowed him to set up a laboratory in the basement. The first experiment Al tried in his lab was to make chemicals by soaking plants in jars of water. It didn't work.

AL: *(pouring out the water)* It's just dirty water! I can't use this! I need real chemicals, but they cost money. Hey, I know! I'll sell vegetables from our garden and earn some money to buy real chemicals! *(pretends to knock on a neighbor's door)* Would you like to buy some fresh cucumbers or carrots?

NEIGHBOR: Sure, Al. Here's a dime for them.

AL: Thanks!

NARRATOR: So Al earned real money to buy real chemicals. His first experiment with the chemicals was to try to make a battery out of scraps of metal and

chemicals. As far as we know, it didn't work. So then Al tried mixing the chemicals to see what would happen .

AL: Let's see, a little of this, a little of that....

(Someone enters with a big sign that says BOOM! and stands in front of Al while showing the sign.)

MRS. EDISON: Al, are you all right?! What happened?!

AL: Yeah, Mom. But I just found out what chemicals not to mix together!

NARRATOR: When Al was 12 years old he got a job selling newspapers on a train that ran from his little town into the city of Detroit. Al would sell newspapers on the train as he rode into town in the morning, spend the day reading at a library, then ride the train home in the evening.

One day he almost missed the train. He was running to try to jump up onto the train. A man saw him and was afraid he was going to get run over. The man grabbed the only body part he could reach: Al's ears. He pulled Al up into the train car. Unfortunately, Al felt something in his ears snap and his hearing was never the same after that. He went through most of his life almost deaf.

His job on the train came to an end very suddenly. The owner of the train had permitted Al to use one the baggage cars as a laboratory. Needless to say, Al was experimenting with chemicals again, and one day--

(enter with BOOM sign again)

TRAIN OWNER: Get off my train, Al! And take this stuff with you! *(pantomimes throwing Al's belongings off the train)* I can't believe I ever let you bring chemicals in here in the first place! Good-bye!

NARRATOR: So Al moved on to bigger and better things. He moved to a bigger town and decided to start introducing himself as "Thomas." He got a job sending and receiving telegraph messages. While he was working at the telegraph office, he decided to try his hand at improving an existing invention called the "stock ticker." The stock ticker was a machine that received telegraph messages concerning how much money companies were making (or losing) so that investors could decide where to invest their money. The new and improved stock ticker worked so well that a business man bought it from him for a huge amount of money.

BUSINESS MAN: Thomas, I like this new stock ticker. It would improve my business a lot. How much do you want for it?

THOMAS: Ah, how about..... um.....

BUSINESS MAN: Would forty thousand be enough?

THOMAS: (*trying to conceal shock and amazement*) Forty thousand?? Ah, sure. I think so. Wow, that will really buy a lot of chemicals!

NARRATOR: With that forty thousand dollars Thomas Edison decided to set up an inventing lab. He filled the lab with every material and chemical imaginable.

THOMAS: I've got everything here! From elephant hides to the eyeballs of a United States Senator!

NARRATOR: Thomas had enough money to be able to hire men to work for him. He also hired a secretary. Her name was Mary and she was only 16.

THOMAS: Mary, I love the way you take memos. Will you marry me?

MARY: Oh, Thomas. (*bats her eyes and looks adoringly at him*)

NARRATOR: So Thomas and Mary got married. One hour after the ceremony he had to dash back to the lab.

THOMAS: See you later, honey. There's an emergency at the lab.

MARY: Thomas, not only is today our wedding day, it's also Christmas Day! Can't you ever take a day off?!

THOMAS: But I've promised the world that my invention factory will produce a minor invention every ten days and a really major invention every six months! (*He dashes off*)

NARRATOR: Thomas Edison was an amazing man who needed very little sleep. He expected all the workers in his lab to follow his schedule and work almost around the clock. They called themselves the "insomnia squads."

(*Workers are pantomiming sleepily going about tasks, some having fallen asleep over their work.*)

THOMAS: Here we are. Refreshments for everyone! (*bring in tray with refreshments*) This will keep you going!

WORKER: Mr. Edison, I don't think I can stay awake any longer.

THOMAS: Nonsense! All you need is some inspiring music!

NARRATOR: So Thomas would play his big pipe organ and give pep talks till the wee hours of the morning.

THOMAS: Isn't this inspiring music? And just look at that wonderful crescent moon!

NARRATOR: One night Thomas Edison called his workers over to see something really amazing. He showed them a cylinder wrapped in tin foil with a funnel thing attached to it.

THOMAS: Watch this! (*Yells into the funnel*) Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow!

(*All the workers laugh at him*)

NARRATOR: Then he reset the cylinder and turned the crank. They heard his exact words. (*Play recording*)

WORKER: I can't believe it! It really works!

NARRATOR: Thomas Edison's next great achievement was to invent a light source that could be used safely in homes. He wasn't the first person to think of the idea. Many inventors had come up with ways to make lights. Edison's goal was to make a light bulb that was so safe and so inexpensive that every home in the country would be lit by his bulbs. It took a lot of experimenting to find the perfect filament for his bulb.

THOMAS: Let's see.... I've got to find some material for the filament that won't burn up when the electricity goes through it. I've tried wood, straw, cornsilk, horsehair, fishing line, metals like gold and nickel, even a piece of stringy stuff from a coconut shell. What haven't I tried? (*Looks over at bearded assistant*) Hmm.. That's an idea. (*Goes over to assistant*) Hey, John, hold still a minute. (*He then plucks out a hair from his beard.*)

WORKER: Ouch! What was that for?

THOMAS: My new invention.

NARRATOR: Thomas would not give up. He finally tried a piece of thread coated in black tar. And...

THOMAS: It works!!

NARRATOR: Part of Thomas Edison's genius was to invent things that were both useful and affordable. After he perfected the light bulb, he went on to start an electric company for his town so that everyone could enjoy electric light in their homes. Throughout his life he always lived by this motto:

THOMAS: If it won't sell, I won't invent it!