

## FAMILY FARE

*Laurel Graeber*

## Illuminating Edison

Most children know Thomas Edison as the genius who invented the light bulb and that funny machine that preceded the CD player. Yet Edison was more than a scientific hero; he was also a complicated man who

insisted on controlling others.

It is this flawed, more human side that emerges in "Young Tom Edison," a new musical from Theaterworks/USA. But rather than just knock Edison off his pedestal, the play shows how his character developed. Cruelly mocked by other children for his deafness (scarlet fever had destroyed much of his hearing), Edison needed a strong will. It is a tribute to Peter Parnell, the playwright, and Jamie LaVerdiere, who plays Edison as a boy, that you come to feel both admiration and compassion for this arrogant young man.

The hourlong play shows how Edison created a newspaper for rail commuters when he was only a teenager and then talked his way into a job at a telegraph office after saving the owner's small child on the train tracks. The production, directed by John Henry Davis, makes these events lively, from the rescue (hilariously mimed) to Edison's discovery of how to send two messages across the same telegraph wire.

The music and lyrics, by Eric Schorr, provide moments of levity, especially when Edison's favorite authors step out of books to regale him. Isaac Newton, for instance, sings a song about trial and error.

It is a rare musical that demands a sequel, but this one makes you want to know more about Edison after he lighted America's homes. "Older Tom Edison," maybe?

"Young Tom Edison," through Feb. 8 at the Promenade Theater, Broadway at 76th Street. Performances: tomorrow at 12:30 P.M.; Sunday at 10:30 A.M. and 12:30 P.M.; Feb. 14 and 15 at 12:30 P.M. Tickets: \$18.50. Orders: (212) 627-7373, weekdays.