

Halley's comet

US commercialism runs riot

ALTHOUGH few amateur astronomers—or professional ones, for that matter—have yet espied Edmond Halley's comet in its 1986 apparition, there can be few members of the public in the United States who have not yet woken up to the fact that something unusual is soon to appear in the heavens. Not since Apollo 11 landed on the Moon has the public consciousness been so deluged with astronomical facts and figures, and the phenomenon is rapidly becoming an excuse for a nationwide party.

Parties need party suppliers, and suppliers have sprung up for every conceivable comet-related purpose. The Halley's comet T-shirts were perhaps inevitable (at least a dozen different varieties are available), although the manufacturers have not taken the apparently obvious opportunity to save money by sticking for once to monochrome; full 4-colour images of the comet, with some artistic licence, are standard. And the dedicated engravers of unique commemorative medals have of course been hard at work. More surprising, though, have been the comet cola and the comet pills, the latter guaranteed to ward off the harmful effects of comet vapours. The Grand Rapids Public Museum in Michigan, supplier of comet pills, point out that their efficacy has been proved beyond question: there were no casualties among those who took the same pills during comet Halley's 1910 appearance.

The comet has not only given rise to new product lines: whole new companies have been created to take advantage of the marketing opportunities. Bumper stickers, special comet stamps and posters ranging from educational to psychedelic are all selling well. Among the most ambitious of the new comet corporations is Halley's Comet Interplanetary Corporation, which advertises offices in New York, California and the Milky Way, Quadrant 7. The corporation offers its interplanetary market a complete comet party kit, which includes the game "pin the tail to the comet". And, in the country that invented movies, it is perhaps no surprise that Tobe Hooper's "Lifeorce" should be based on the idea that the comet is peopled with strange and rather unpleasant aliens.

For the more serious minded, there will be plenty of opportunity for self-improvement. Hardly a natural history museum in the country is not making some effort to satisfy the insatiable demand for information about Mr Halley's comet. Lectures are standard for Americans, ever keen to educate themselves, and every qualified lecturer has a full tour booked. Planetariums have special shows, usually daily. And book publishers have had a bonanza.

Telescope manufacturers have come into their own. Sales of serious telescopes for amateurs have rocketed (there is likely to be a glut of second-hand telescopes on the market next year). In addition, a number of manufacturers have produced simple refractors aimed specially at would-be Halley watchers, such as the \$200 Halley-scope manufactured by Halley Optical Corporation. At least one telescope advertised as especially suitable for viewing the comet has attained the ultimate accolade in marketing respectability by being included in mass-mailing from the American Express Company.

Although the size of the comet will not be a problem, its brightness will be. Owners of personal computers, however, will be able to choose from a wide selection of programmes that will enable them to track the comet. And for those who do not own computers, there are various other stick-

and-string devices that will compute the comet's location at any given date and hour.

The comet is going to be much more easily visible from the Southern Hemisphere than the Northern, so its appearance has served as an excuse for long and luxurious cruises for many. Bookings are at record levels. The Planetary Society is offering a cruise to Rio de Janeiro with a special discount for members; the cruise includes a four-man team of "eminent astronomers and scientists" who will be available to give personal advice on viewing the comet. The Royal Viking Line offers an Auckland-to-Sydney cruise with the redoubtable Carl Sagan on board and available for consultation. Or, for those who prefer to stay on dry land, there are motor-coach tours in South America. All in all, the comet is being billed as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, which it will be for most. But one cannot help feeling sorry for the many other comets that will come and go entirely unremarked outside serious astronomy circles. **Tim Beardsley**

Erice

Scheme for world laboratory

A "WORLD LABORATORY" devoted to "research without secrecy" could be a major factor in promoting an international climate of openness and sharing, Professor Antonino Zichichi urged last month. Addressing the Erice International Seminar on Nuclear War, Zichichi outlined his proposals for such a worldwide community of scientists which would conduct joint research into the "dramatic problems" facing the world, including the threat of nuclear war, world hunger and political violence. Results of this research would be made available for the benefit of all.

Preliminary work on the concept began last September, so that Zichichi could report to this year's seminar the establishment of working groups on topics ranging from high-energy physics and asteroid encounters to fuel slurry technology and food production. The working groups are now working out programmes, and as each of these is completed, the necessary laboratory facilities and financial support will be sought internationally. Professor Zichichi does not expect any difficulty in getting this backing—the concept of the world laboratory has grown out of the regular international seminars at the Centre for Scientific Culture in Erice, which enjoy the encouragement and support of many internationally eminent figures, including the President of Italy, the Pope and the Secretary of the United Nations. How much real support the world laboratory will enjoy from governments and regimes not strongly committed to international "openness" is not, however, clear; but Zichichi is enough of a pragmatist to realize that "the world laboratory must begin with the possible, it will begin with the

feasible", working initially in those fields where "collaboration without secrecy" does not run counter to government restrictions.

"Words, talks and round tables", Zichichi told the closing session of the seminar, "are totally useless and serve only as illusion makers". Instead of indulging in such activities, scientists should devote their time to the study of how the world laboratory could become a reality. At next year's seminar, he said, he will report back on the support of governments who have "begun to remove this terrible enemy of humanity: secrecy".

But if the world laboratory is to achieve its purpose, it will have to be supported by major powers both East and West. The Chinese delegates to the Erice conference seemed impressed by the concept, according to one participant, although the main result of their presence at Erice so far has been an invitation to one of last year's speakers to visit China to advise on building nuclear fall-out shelters. The participation of Soviet scientists in the world laboratory is also essential, according to Professor Zichichi, and the initial Soviet reaction last September was positive. This year, however, the Soviet delegation failed to arrive at Erice, an absence that many participants linked with the disappearance last March of the Soviet nuclear winter expert Vladimir Aleksandrov during a visit to Spain. Zichichi stresses, however, that he has so far received no explanation of the Soviet absence, but has every hope that further discussions with them about the proposed world laboratory will take place in the near future. **Vera Rich**