

AMERICAN TV DROPS ITS PRUDERY

By CHARLES FOLEY

LOS ANGELES (Ofns). —

A NEW wave of sexual licence is flowing through television in the United States. With the nation's public television network — dedicated to education, the arts, and serious debate on social and political issues — leading the revolution, abortion, wife-swapping, homosexuality, venereal disease, four-letter words have all been aired. Now the big commercial networks are moving, with an often startling candour, into the same field.

Thirty million Americans recently saw Ricky Nelson, a once clean-cut young pop singer, star of a famous "family" show, play a vicious pimp who runs a school of teenage prostitutes. He uses their earnings to support his drug habit, and knifes them to death when they contract VD. It is estimated that around six million children under 18 watched this segment of the weekly "Streets of San Francisco," one of the highest-rated shows in the country.

Movies bought for TV are also showing a new boldness. Barely a year ago, Visconti's "The Damned" was cut out of all recognition by

network censors before it was shown late at night on CBS. But in recent weeks viewers have been able to see — virtually uncut — the rape of Mia Farrow by the Devil in "Rosemary's Baby," Much else in a similar vein has been visible.

Public TV, however, still leads the field by several miles in candour. The more conservative denizens of Los Angeles, indeed, sometimes call KCET, the city's public channel, "the dirtiest station in town," an appellation which irritates directors, who must constantly appeal to the local community for financial support.

Public television is not an American version of the BBC, but the two services do have much in common: for a start, they frequently screen one another's shows. The BBC purchased rights to the American network's "VD Blues" — a controversial programme which used comedy, songs and sketches to illuminate and warn about the growing dangers of venereal disease in the United States. Playwrights Jules Feiffer and Israel Horowitz wrote much of the show, and a rock group called "Dr.

Hook" sang the theme song, "Don't Give a Dose to the One You Love Most."

The latest of many BBC serials to appear on KCET is a dramatised version of "Nana," described by the station as "Emile Zola's lusty story of the high and low life of a voluptuous courtesan... deliciously amoral." The nudity, lesbianism and varied sexual quirks of "Nana" are offset, for some, by its status as a classic; and the nation's moral watchdogs are soothed by the realization that a normal public TV station on a normal weeknight gets less than two per cent of the total audience in its area.

Nevertheless, that works out nationally at nearly a million people, and shows are becoming ever more bold. A documentary on the local poet Charles Bukowski, for instance, was peppered with so many "f..."s and "s..."s — a first for U.S. television — that even the blasé citizens of Los Angeles were startled. Elsewhere around the country, public TV stations have shown, among other things, a completely nude ballet and Yoko Ono's poignant study of the human backside, which consists largely of a series of static shots of people's buttocks.

When Yoko makes your TV set, can DEEP THROAT be far behind? No. That fantastically successful piece of hard-core porn has in fact already been shown on the small screen, although only via a cable

system operated by students at Syracuse University. Cable TV, designed to give clear reception in areas that have trouble getting normal over-the-air signals, is considered by many to be the worst offender of all. The cable companies can operate additional channels of their own and subscribers in some cities are being treated to late-night adult films that would rate an "X" in the cinemas.

The law requires that some channels be set aside for "public access," the idea being that city councils, schools, ethnic minorities, anyone, indeed, with a good cause and a desire to communicate can make use of the medium. It all seemed very innocent when the project began two years ago. But now cable customers, in a few major cities, have been offered public-access programmes that show nudity, marijuana-smoking, kinky sex, and the physical results of a sex-change operation.

Although the Federal Communications Commission bans "obscene and indecent" programming in its regulations, some municipal boards have specifically prohibited TV companies from exercising control over "public access" shows, and the confused legal situation has hamstrung would-be censors. Meanwhile cable TV is booming across the country. Some in the industry estimate that by 1968 between 40 and 60 per cent of American homes will have cable TV.