

TV: Two Programs Exploit Subjects

Hope Diamond Study Remains Tall Tale

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Barring man-made or natural disasters, ecological and otherwise, show business may be the death of us all. Tonight's television specimens include programs using—that is the precise word—the Smithsonian Institution and the assassination of President Kennedy.

The Smithsonian special, the latest in an uneven series, is "The Legendary Curse of the Hope Diamond" (on CBS at 10 P.M.). Waving the august imprimatur of the institution, this is a dramatization based on a book by Evelyn Walsh McLean, who acquired the famous stone in 1912 and then proceeded to stumble through a life of personal tragedies, including the untimely deaths of her two children and the mental deterioration of an alcoholic husband.

Mrs. McLean's story presents, without a touch of skepticism, a series of stiff tableaux that are intercut with flashbacks outlining the stone's history, dating to Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI. The scenes, in their own incredible way, with statuesque Claudine Longet playing Marie to diminutive Robert Clary's Louis, achieve a gemlike quality for anyone interested in theater of the absurd.

Just about everyone who touches the stone, including President Warren G. Harding, seems to encounter disaster. Finally, Mrs. McLean takes the diamond, which was supposedly stolen from a Hindu

idol, to her parish priest, who performs an exorcism, with the dramatically required accompaniment of thunder and lightning. The Hope diamond is now in the rare-gems collection of the Smithsonian, where it hasn't bothered anyone in years.

At the end of the hour, a couple of Smithsonian officials appear in an attempt to bring a touch of scientific rationality to the proceedings. The "legendary curse" is treated as little more than an interesting myth. The gem is merely a magnificent example of man's instinct for collecting. At this point, though, science and reason have been completely overwhelmed by the titillating demands of schlock entertainment.

Several weeks ago, Gerardo Rivera's "Goodnight, America" began with a silly interview of Raquel Welch, the actress. It was the kind of thing that is fairly typical for late-night television. It ended, though, with a discussion of the John F. Kennedy assassination, including some horrifying film footage recorded by Abraham Zapruder, a Dallas dress manufacturer who happened to be watching the President's motorcade near the book repository.

Not surprisingly, that segment of the program generated widespread response. Tonight, from 11:30 to 1 A.M. on Channel 7, Mr. Rivera is devoting his entire program to a "comprehensive review of the findings of the Warren Commission."

The review is not, of course, comprehensive. A few experts, who either side with or disagree with the Warren Report, are paraded before the cameras. Each

Dallas Assassination Viewed by Rivera

makes a fairly convincing case for his position. No real new evidence is exposed. Legitimate questions are raised—most have been raised before—and even those supporting the Warren Report note that they would have no objection to the inquiry's being reopened.

Actually, Mr. Rivera's program is only one of many treatments the subject has attracted in print, TV and radio in recent months. In the aftermath of Watergate and its stunning revelations, the whole of recent American history has been opened to re-examination. The darkly improbable can no longer be casually considered impossible. At the same time, easy sensationalism becomes more seductive.

Mr. Rivera's ends are his own concern, and he hardly tries to conceal them. At one point tonight, he refers to "the execution of the President of the United States." His means, however, can be questioned closely. He is not content to discuss the Kennedy assassination. He feels forced to dramatize, evidently for the sake of production values.

Mr. Rivera holds up a rifle, "the same type" that was said to have been used by Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin. He used models to simulate the limousine seating positions of the President and Gov. John B. Connally of Texas. He shows the Zapruder film again, not once but twice, in close-ups, while muttering, "Uh, God, that's awful."