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THE NIGHT

On Display, Feminism In 2 Moods

By PHOEBE HOBAN

HOW many feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb? There's obviously been significant progress on the stand-up circuit — not a single one of the comics who participated in the Ms. Foundation's 25th anniversary party at Caroline's Comedy Club on Wednesday night told a light-bulb joke.

Instead there were raunchy routines by Joy Behar, Kate Clinton, Ellen Cleghorne and Caroline Rhea. And amusing ad libs by the hostess, Janeane Garofalo, who had to pick up the slack when the show, which was being taped for the Lifetime Television network, ran into technical difficulties.

But the funniest moment was unrehearsed — the spontaneous comic relief provided by Courtney Love. Ms. Love, easy to spot in a slinky backless silver dress, was draped on the shoulder of the makeup artist Kevyn Aucoin, when she suddenly engaged in a pointed exchange with Cory Kahaney, the show's warm-up comic. "With all due respect, forget Gloria Steinem, there's Courtney Love," said Ms. Kahaney from the stage, adding, "You look fabulous."

Ms. Love didn't miss a beat. "But not as good as Ashley Judd," she replied. She continued on a rock-star-like roll. "It's the teen-age beauty pageant syndrome," she said, adding a remark about Ms. Judd's apparent permanent afterglow.

Then she stood up and shimmied like a dancer in pre-Disney Times Square. "I'm sitting next to Gloria Steinem and having dinner with Milos Forman!" she proclaimed. (Ms. Love disappeared soon afterward, presumably to keep her date with Mr. Forman, who directed her in the film "The People vs. Larry Flynt.")

The jokes quickly evaporated when the show ended, and some participants were asked what it meant to be a feminist in 1998. "I think it's the same, but deeper," said Ms. Steinem, who looked as if she could have just stepped out of a 1973 poster. "Everybody thinks differently now about what their daughter can do. On the other hand, having won the majority support, I would have thought we would be further along."