

MAY 2, 1997

'Ellen' receives out-standing ratings

Landmark episode triples usual viewership

By RICHARD HUFF

Daily News Staff Writer

VIEWERS came out in droves for Wednesday night's much-ballyhooed coming-out episode of ABC's "Ellen."

The hourlong show, in which lead character Ellen Morgan followed the much-publicized lead of star Ellen DeGeneres and revealed she was a lesbian, generated the highest one-night ratings for any ABC entertainment series in three years.

While it more than tripled its usual audience, it did not, however, do better than a strong weekly episode of the NBC powerhouses "ER" and "Seinfeld." It also pales in comparison to such historical highs as the last "M★A★S★H" (77% of the viewing audience) and "Who Shot J.R." episode of "Dallas" (76 share) in the early '80s. The comparison is a bit unfair, though, because viewers had far fewer channel choices back then.

ABC research estimates that 42 million watched at least a portion of Wednesday's "Ellen." The usual weekly "Ellen" audience is 13.6 million.

"We thought it would do well and substantially better than a regular episode of 'Ellen,'" said Larry Hyams, ABC's veep of prime-time re-

search. "But it certainly surpassed our expectations."

The program averaged a 23.4 rating (percentage of the nation's 97 million TV homes) and a 35 share, easily beating every other program on the air Wednesday night. The show averaged 36,150,000 viewers. (The next most-watched show Wednesday was "PrimeTime Live," which followed on ABC with an interview with DeGeneres and her parents, attracting 23.8 million viewers.) For the season, "Ellen" has averaged a 9.6 rating/16 share.

The last ABC series to have such a successful episode was a March 1994 "Home Improvement," which turned in a 24.4 rating/33 share.

Wednesday's "Ellen" will almost surely finish near the top of the week's Nielsen rankings, and could even displace one of NBC's Thursday dynamos as the top show for the week.

"This tells me that when American television programmers take a chance on diversity, it pays off," said Alan Klein, a spokesman for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, which sponsored parties tied to the episode. "The American public is interested in seeing reality on the screens."

The previous highwater

mark for "Ellen" — a 19.2/30 — came the same night three years ago that "Home Improvement" set the recent ABC-series Nielsen standard.

For Wednesday's outing episode, Boston and San Francisco generated the largest viewership, with 45% of the televisions on at the time tuned to ABC. Here and in Los Angeles, 39% of the sets on were tuned to "Ellen." In Chicago, distracted by a Bulls playoff game on a cable channel, 37% watched "Ellen."

The show generated "several hundred" calls of protest, according to an ABC spokeswoman, who declined to discuss specifics. "We also got a generous amount of calls in support," she noted.

The outing episode ran fully sponsored, heavy on ads by movie studios.

Whether "Ellen" can retain any of the extra audience in coming episodes remains to be seen. Most observers, however, believe the show will get some benefit.

"I think ['Ellen'] will probably do better than it was doing for a while," said Steve Sternberg, a senior partner at BJK&E. "Any time you get a sampling like that, there are always some people that stay with it. I would expect it to do well next week. It might gain a



GLITTER & BE GAY: Ellen DeGeneres (l.) and guest star Laura Dern

few share points."

Some have their doubts, though. "I thought it would double her normal ratings," Tom DeCabia, senior vice president of the Paul Schul-

man Co., said of Wednesday's show. "But now it goes right back to where it was all along. Obviously it got a lot of sampling, not 'Lets see if it's a comedy.'"