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Hypnotist The Incredible Boris to appear at Erie's Project Warehouse

Preview by **Dave Richards**
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You are relaxed. You are sleepy, very sleepy. Your eyelids are getting heavy, very heavy.

You are not in history class. You're watching the Incredible Boris, a nationally known comedian-hypnotist, who will perform Friday and Saturday at Project Warehouse.

Boris Cherniak, aka the Incredible Boris, has put people to sleep for years. Check that. He's hypnotized audiences for two decades, convincing them their eyelids are glued shut or their belly buttons have disappeared.

Luckily, there's no Freddy Krueger streak inside him; he doesn't harm anyone when they're under. Cherniak uses his shows to entertain and showcase the power of hypnosis.

"The material is, at the most, silly, without being demeaning or degrading," said Cherniak in a phone interview. "I'm sure you've heard stories about people making love to a chair and all that kind of stuff. I try to present a classy show that is fun, without demeaning anyone."

So willing subjects will not be told they're aboard the Titanic, that their butts are on fire, or -- even worse -- that they're trapped inside a Rob Schneider film festival. Cherniak devises fun scenarios that get laughs without humiliating anyone.

For instance, he often suggests that someone is a famous celebrity.

"The big craze lately is 'American Idol,'" Cherniak said. "So I have people do the whole thing as if they are participants and judges on the show. I act as Ryan Seacrest."

Two clips of "Idol" sequences posted on Cherniak' website are pretty hysterical: college-age guys who act like Simon Cowell, contestants who think they can sing but, at best, warble.

"The comedy lies in the reaction a lot of times," said Cherniak. "Because no two people will react the same way."

Cherniak grew up in Russia across the street from the Moscow Circus, where he'd hang out with Yuri Nikolin, one of the country's renowned clowns.

"He took me almost under his wing. I'd drop by and visit back stage quite often. I still have a program signed by him," Cherniak said.

He remembers being able to memorize entire routines by Russian comedians he saw on TV. Blessed with perfect pitch, he also became an exemplary musician. Cherniak still plays six instruments, including guitar, piano, and saxophone.

His family moved to Canada when he was 10. "My family wanted a better life for their kids," he said.

At 17, Cherniak read the "The Search for Bridey Murphy," in which a hypnotist engages in past-life regression therapy. The client details long-ago events from before her birth. After doing some research, the hypnotist learns everything she said is true.

That intrigued him.

"I needed to know more," said Cherniak, who began plunging into books about hypnosis. "The whole thing simply opened my mind -- 'Oh, wow! There is more to this than meets the eye, and I can control it.' It's a fascinating subject. In 30 years, I haven't stopped learning."

He talks in sound-bite ways about hypnotism.

"We all live in a trance. What I do is show that trance can be controlled," he said.

"All hypnosis is self-hypnosis, and as a hypnotist, I just act as a guide."

Onstage, he's more than just a hypnotist, though. He's an improv comedian. He must be quick on his feet.

"I'm an improv wizard, if you like. I can make the moment funny because I can see the fun in people," Cherniak said. "When I get offstage, I am exhausted. I give the audience absolutely everything and more. And I want them to be as exhausted as me by the time I finish by having laughed so hard they won't forget it."

He doesn't do that "When you wake up, you'll remember nothing" bit. Those who volunteer to be hypnotized will be aware of what they're doing and remember.

"A lot of times, you hear about the hypnotist making people forget. The reason for this is they probably made them do something embarrassing or something that would not be OK for them to remember. At the end of every show, I make people remember."

He also bestows participants with a gift of sorts. If, say, you've tried to quit smoking, he'll try to help, just as he hypnotizes people with phobias during regular visits on "The Maury Povich Show." But you must be serious.

"There is no such thing as I tell you," said Cherniak. "You have to want to. All a hypnotist does is to reinforce your will power. I won't be running behind whoever, taking cigarettes out of your mouth."

"I have no supernatural or magical powers; I never claimed to have them. The magic I discovered is the ability to think for yourself and use your own mind. You can be in control of your life, rather than life controlling you."