

Broadway and a Sense of Smell

Also known as the story of how my musical theater obsession led me to refine my history taking during a pandemic

Unknown to a lot of people I work with these days, performance art was a significant aspect of my life before this pandemic. Since my personal talents only went as far as spoken word poetry in venues such as Sev's Café during my student days, I derived much more joy from watching plays, dance recitals, concerts, and just about any live performance I had the time and money to spend on. One of my biggest dreams was to travel to New York to catch a play on Broadway or to London to visit the West End. I wouldn't just sit in the audience, I would go to the stage door after the show to get autographs or an impromptu meet and greet with the stage actors and actresses whose public profiles I followed on social media. I swore up and down that I would do this somehow, someday before settling down.

Just like all the best-laid plans of mice and men, the pandemic came to upset it all. It was a good thing that I had yet to buy any tickets for any 2020 performances, otherwise I would have been crying about refunds. What hit me almost immediately was the shock upon realizing that there would be no theater *anywhere* for weeks or even months. How would my friends and acquaintances in the arts industries get any income? Would venues still be financially viable once quarantine was over? Would anyone still *remember their parts* once shows could open again? These questions and more whirled through my head during the earliest days of the pandemic, around March 2020. Sure there were now streaming options for live "quarantine readings" and recorded pro performances of some classic plays such as Phantom of the Opera, but none of that could ever come up to the glitz and glamor of the actual stage, or its impact on a live audience.

In the middle of my drowning myself in Broadway recordings, a friend of mine from the US sent a message to our theater fandom group chat: "*Tveit has COVID*".

I messaged back, "*Are you kidding?*" Of all the stage performers that my friends and I followed on and off (depending on the highs and lows of individual careers) on social media, Aaron Tveit was literally the last person we thought would get COVID-19 from a show on Broadway. Granted that yes, several nights of performing in the "Moulin Rouge" musical each week would definitely expose him (and as it turns out some of his fellow cast and crew) to the virus, but it just didn't compute that his name could be coupled to a case number in the US. How could someone who was a known health buff and just a few years our senior, end up getting this virus??

Like any curious fan I looked up Tveit's Twitter and Instagram pages. Surprisingly, he was open about his story of getting sick, coming up with a positive result on his swab test, and having to isolate till he recovered. One thing that leapt out in his story was that early on he had lost his sense of taste and smell. Like many patients who experienced this, he did not know initially that this was an early sign of a COVID-19 infection. Thankfully by the time he posted on social media, he was already on the way to recovery, much to the relief of his fan base (myself included).

Tveit's story of his virus-induced temporary anosmia did get me thinking however as I went about my work in primary care. Were there many other people in my surroundings who also had this symptom, but shrugged it off as just 'nothing'? Why wasn't anyone talking about this more often in social media? Why was discussion about this limited to case reports only? Granted that it wasn't as 'dramatic' a symptom as respiratory trouble, but it was still an important warning sign. At least it was important enough for me to act on at work.

In the weeks and months after I would end up screening more patients for various respiratory concerns. Of course I would be given a questionnaire to base my interview on. The usual symptoms were always there: cough, colds, sore throat, fever, trouble breathing, and diarrhea. I would always add one question of my own: “*nawalan ka ba ng panlasa or pang-amoy?*” Fortunately not many people I did meet would answer in the affirmative, but those who did often ended up undergoing the swab test, with a number of positive results. After all, COVID-19 and anosmia aren’t limited only to Broadway heartthrobs!

P.S. I never got past my personal embarrassment to allow me to tell Mr. Tveit about how that story of his helped my clinical work. But in the event you are reading this, good sir, thank you.