

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, APPELLATE DIVISION,
SECOND JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT

People v. Delacruz

2022 NY Slip Op 04641 (N.Y. Ct. App. 2022) · No. 2016-07058 · Decided July 20, 2022

SUMMARY

The Appellate Division, Second Department affirmed Pedro Delacruz's convictions for murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree. The court held that the evidence was legally sufficient and not against the weight of the evidence, upheld admission of the decedent's statements as excited utterances and relevant prior misconduct, and found the remaining constitutional claims unpreserved or meritless.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of the State of New York, Appellate Division, Second Judicial Department
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per Curiam; Francesca E. Connolly, J.P.; Joseph J. Maltese, J.; Paul Wooten, J.; Lara J. Genovesi, J.
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	July 20, 2022
DOCKET	2016-07058
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Defendant appealed from a judgment of the Supreme Court, Westchester County, entered after a jury convicted him of murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree and the court imposed sentence.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	For legal sufficiency, the court viewed the evidence in the light most favorable to the prosecution and asked whether it established guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. For weight of the evidence, the court independently reviewed the record while according great deference to the jury's opportunity to observe the witnesses and hear the testimony. Admission of hearsay as an excited utterance was reviewed as an evidentiary decision committed to the sound judgment of the trial court. Unpreserved claims were not reviewable under CPL 470.05(2).
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published New York Appellate Division decision

PARTIES

Pedro Delacruz v. The People of the State of New York

TOPICS

evidence

hearsay

appellate procedure

preservation of error

reasonable doubt

PRACTICE AREAS

criminal law

criminal procedure

evidence

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the evidence was legally sufficient to support the convictions for murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree.
2. Whether the verdict was against the weight of the evidence.
3. Whether the decedent's statements to his girlfriend were properly admitted under the excited-utterance exception to the hearsay rule.
4. Whether the testimony was improperly admitted as evidence of an uncharged crime or prior bad act under *People v. Molineux*.
5. Whether the defendant's confrontation and due-process claims warranted reversal despite the lack of preservation.

HOLDINGS

1. The legal-sufficiency challenge was unpreserved because the defendant failed to make the required specific motion at trial; in any event, the evidence was legally sufficient to establish guilt of murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree beyond a reasonable doubt.
2. The verdict was not against the weight of the evidence.
3. The trial court properly admitted the decedent's statements as excited utterances because the statements were made while the decedent remained under the stress of excitement caused by the chase.
4. The defendant's *Molineux* challenge was unpreserved because he did not raise that specific objection below; alternatively, the testimony was properly admitted because it provided necessary background and was probative of intent and motive, with its probative value outweighing any potential prejudice.
5. The defendant's confrontation and due-process claims were unpreserved for appellate review and, in any event, were without merit.

KEY QUOTATIONS

*"In any event, viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the prosecution (see *People v. Contes*, 60 NY2d 620, 621), we find that it was legally sufficient to establish the defendant's guilt of murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree beyond a reasonable doubt."* (2022 NY Slip Op 04641, at *1)

*“Moreover, in fulfilling our responsibility to conduct an independent review of the weight of the evidence (see CPL 470.15[5]; People v Danielson, 9 NY3d 342, 348), we nevertheless accord great deference to the jury's opportunity to view the witnesses, hear the testimony, and observe demeanor” (2022 NY Slip Op 04641, at *1)*

*“The Supreme Court thus properly admitted the testimony under the excited utterance exception since the record demonstrates that the decedent made the statements while he was "still under the stress of excitement" of the chase” (2022 NY Slip Op 04641, at *2)*

*“If the evidence has substantial probative value and is directly relevant to the purpose—other than to show criminal propensity—for which it is offered, the probative value of the evidence outweighs the danger of prejudice and the court may admit the evidence” (2022 NY Slip Op 04641, at *2)*

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The decedent's girlfriend testified that, during a telephone call a few days before the decedent's death, the decedent sounded out of breath and said that he had been chased. He also stated that the defendant had chased him with a gun and a knife. The trial court admitted the testimony under the excited-utterance exception to the hearsay rule and as evidence relevant to the relationship between the parties, the defendant's intent, and his motive.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Supreme Court, Westchester County, admitted testimony from the decedent's girlfriend concerning statements the decedent made during a telephone call shortly before his death. A jury convicted Delacruz of murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree, and the trial court entered judgment on May 24, 2016. The Appellate Division affirmed, concluding that the sufficiency, weight-of-the-evidence, hearsay, Molineux, confrontation, and due-process claims either were unpreserved or lacked merit.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- People v. Hawkins, 11 NY3d 484, 492
- People v. Contes, 60 NY2d 620, 621
- People v. Danielson, 9 NY3d 342, 348
- People v. Mateo, 2 NY3d 383, 410
- People v. Bleakley, 69 NY2d 490, 495
- People v. Romero, 7 NY3d 633
- People v. Morris, 189 AD3d 1077, 1079
- People v. Cummings, 31 NY3d 204, 208-209
- People v. Hernandez, 28 NY2d 1056, 1057

- People v. Edwards, 47 NY2d 493, 498
- People v. Ortiz, 198 AD3d 924, 927
- People v. Nalty, 160 AD2d 958, 959
- People v. Molineux, 168 NY 264, 293
- People v. Murray, 155 AD3d 1106, 1111
- People v. Cass, 18 NY3d 553, 559-560
- People v. Alvino, 71 NY2d 233, 241
- People v. Allweiss, 48 NY2d 40, 46-47
- People v. Morris, 21 NY3d 588, 594
- People v. Morales, 189 AD3d 1464, 1467
- People v. Dorm, 12 NY3d 16, 19
- People v. Bradford, 118 AD3d 1254, 1256
- People v. Williams, 27 AD3d 673, 673
- People v. Johnson, 213 AD2d 675, 676
- People v. Tavaréz, 155 AD3d 783, 787
- People v. Castello, 176 AD3d 730, 733

OPINION

People v. Delacruz 2022 NY Slip Op 04641

PER CURIAM.

People v Delacruz (2022 NY Slip Op 04641) People v Delacruz 2022 NY Slip Op 04641 Decided on July 20, 2022 Appellate Division, Second Department Published by New York State Law Reporting Bureau pursuant to Judiciary Law § 431. This opinion is uncorrected and subject to revision before publication in the Official Reports. Decided on July 20, 2022

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Appellate Division, Second Judicial Department FRANCESCA E. CONNOLLY, J.P.

JOSEPH J. MALTESE

PAUL WOOTEN

LARA J. GENOVESI, JJ. 2016-07058

(Ind. No. 15-00945) [*1]The People of the State of New York, respondent, vPedro Delacruz, appellant. Portale Randazzo, LLP, White Plains, NY (Richard Portale and Chad Mair of counsel), for appellant. Miriam E. Rocah, District Attorney, White Plains, NY (William C. Milaccio and Christine DiSalvo of counsel), for respondent. DECISION & ORDER Appeal by the defendant from a judgment of the Supreme Court, Westchester County (Robert A. Neary, J.), rendered May 24, 2016, convicting him of murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree, upon a jury verdict, and imposing sentence. ORDERED that the judgment is affirmed. The defendant's challenge to the legal sufficiency of the evidence is unpreserved for appellate review (see CPL 470.05[2]; People v Hawkins, 11 NY3d 484, 492). In

any event, viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the prosecution (see *People v Contes*, 60 NY2d 620, 621), we find that it was legally sufficient to establish the defendant's guilt of murder in the second degree and criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree beyond a reasonable doubt. Moreover, in fulfilling our responsibility to conduct an independent review of the weight of the evidence (see CPL 470.15[5]; *People v Danielson*, 9 NY3d 342, 348), we nevertheless accord great deference to the jury's opportunity to view the witnesses, hear the testimony, and observe demeanor (see *People v Mateo*, 2 NY3d 383, 410; *People v Bleakley*, 69 NY2d 490, 495). Upon reviewing the record here, we are satisfied that the verdict of guilt was not against the weight of the evidence (see *People v Romero*, 7 NY3d 633). After a hearing was held to determine the admissibility of testimony from the decedent's girlfriend that, a few days prior to his death, the decedent told her during a telephone call that, among other things, the defendant "just chased [him] with a gun and a knife," the Supreme Court allowed the testimony under the excited utterance exception to the hearsay rule. Contrary to the People's contention, the defendant's challenge to the admission of this testimony under the excited utterance exception is preserved for appellate review. "A spontaneous declaration or excited utterance—made contemporaneously or immediately after a startling event—which asserts the circumstances of that occasion as observed by the declarant is an exception to the prohibition on hearsay" (*People v Morris*, 189 AD3d 1077, 1079, quoting *People v Cummings*, 31 NY3d 204, 209 [internal quotation marks omitted]; see *People v Edwards*, 47 NY2d 493, 498). "The decision to admit hearsay as an excited utterance is an evidentiary decision, 'left to the sound judgment of the trial court'" (*People v Cummings*, 31 NY3d at 208, quoting *People v Hernandez*, 28 NY3d 1056, [*2]1057). Here, the decedent's girlfriend testified that she called the decedent, and when the decedent answered her call it sounded like the decedent had "just finished gettin' chased, he was out of breath." The decedent's girlfriend also testified that during the call, the decedent stated to her that he was "just chased." The Supreme Court thus properly admitted the testimony under the excited utterance exception since the record demonstrates that the decedent made the statements while he was "still under the stress of excitement" of the chase (*People v Hernandez*, 28 NY3d at 1057; see *People v Ortiz*, 198 AD3d 924, 927; *People v Nalty*, 160 AD2d 958, 959). The defendant also challenges the Supreme Court's admission of the testimony as a prior bad act under *People v Molineux* (168 NY 264). This contention is unpreserved for appellate review, as the defendant failed to raise this specific contention before the Supreme Court (see CPL 470.05[2]; *People v Murray*, 155 AD3d 1106, 1111). In any event, this contention is without merit. "[T]he familiar Molineux rule states that evidence of a defendant's uncharged crimes or prior misconduct is not admissible if it cannot logically be connected to some specific material issue in the case, and tends only to demonstrate the defendant's propensity to commit the crime charged" (*People v Cass*, 18 NY3d 553, 559; see *People v Alvino*, 71 NY2d 233, 241; *People v Allweiss*, 48 NY2d 40, 46). Evidence of a defendant's uncharged crimes and prior misconduct may be admissible, however, where it is relevant to a material issue in the case such as intent, motive, knowledge, absence of mistake,

common scheme or plan, or identity (see *People v Morris*, 21 NY3d 588, 594; *People v Molineux*, 168 NY at 293), or if it "provid[es] necessary background information" (*People v Morales*, 189 AD3d 1464, 1467 [internal quotation marks omitted]). "If the evidence has substantial probative value and is directly relevant to the purpose—other than to show criminal propensity—for which it is offered, the probative value of the evidence outweighs the danger of prejudice and the court may admit the evidence" (*People v Cass*, 18 NY3d at 560; see *People v Allweiss*, 48 NY2d at 46-47). Here, the testimony of the decedent's girlfriend was admitted for the legitimate purpose of providing necessary background on the relationship between the parties and was probative of the defendant's intent and motive, and any potential for prejudice was outweighed by the probative value of the evidence (see *People v Dorm*, 12 NY3d 16, 19; *People v Bradford*, 118 AD3d 1254, 1256; *People v Williams*, 27 AD3d 673, 673; *People v Johnson*, 213 AD2d 675, 676). The defendant's remaining contentions, alleging confrontation and due process violations, are unpreserved for appellate review (see *People v Tavarez*, 155 AD3d 783, 787; *People v Castello*, 176 AD3d 730, 733), and, in any event, without merit. CONNOLLY, J.P., MALTESE, WOOTEN and GENOVESI, JJ., concur. ENTER: Maria T. Fasulo Clerk of the Court