

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF MONTANA

State of Montana v. Dawn Marie Jensen

State v. Dawn M. Jensen, 2013 MT 353N (2013) · No. DA 12-0409 · Decided November 19, 2013

SUMMARY

The Montana Supreme Court affirmed Dawn Marie Jensen’s conviction for criminal distribution of dangerous drugs. The court held that an improper prosecutorial comment concerning Jensen’s acceptance of consequences did not prejudice her because the objection was sustained and the jury was properly instructed. The court declined to apply plain-error review to other unobjected-to prosecutorial comments regarding reasonable doubt, common sense, and witness credibility.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of the State of Montana
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Justice Michael E. Wheat; Michael E. Wheat; Mike McGrath; Jim Rice; Beth Baker; Laurie McKinnon
JURISDICTION	Montana
DECIDED	November 19, 2013
DOCKET	DA 12-0409
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Jensen appealed her jury conviction for one count of criminal distribution of dangerous drugs, challenging several closing arguments by the prosecutor and the denial of a new trial.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	A district court's decision regarding a new trial in the interests of justice is reviewed for abuse of discretion. Unpreserved claims are reviewed for plain error only sparingly, when they implicate fundamental constitutional rights and result in a manifest miscarriage of justice.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential
PARTIES	Dawn Marie Jensen v. State of Montana

TOPICS

[criminal procedure](#)[prosecutorial misconduct](#)[reasonable doubt](#)[appellate procedure](#)[standard of review](#)

PRACTICE AREAS

criminal law

criminal procedure

appellate practice

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the prosecutor's statement that Jensen refused to accept her consequences was improper and prejudicial.
2. Whether the prosecutor's unobjected-to comments concerning reasonable doubt, common sense, and the informant's credibility warranted plain-error review or reversal.
3. Whether the district court abused its discretion by refusing to grant a new trial based on the prosecutor's closing arguments.

HOLDINGS

1. The prosecutor's statement that Jensen refused to accept her consequences was improper, but it did not prejudice Jensen's right to a fair trial because the comment was largely irrelevant, the evidence and trial focused on whether she committed the crime, and the district court's admonishment and jury instructions had a curative effect.
2. The court declined to exercise plain-error review because the comments concerning reasonable doubt, common sense, and the informant's credibility did not implicate Jensen's fundamental constitutional rights or cast unfairness into the trial.
3. The district court did not abuse its discretion in refusing to grant a new trial, and Jensen's conviction was affirmed.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The prosecutor's comments that Jensen did not "accept her consequences" were improper." (¶ 5)

"Since none of these statements jeopardized Jensen's fundamental rights or cast unfairness into the trial, we decline to exercise plain error review of these issues." (¶ 10)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The prosecution argued during closing that the reasonable-doubt burden was not unreasonable, that jurors should use common sense, and that the State's informant had no incentive to lie because she faced criminal prosecution for doing so. The prosecutor also stated that Jensen refused to accept her consequences, prompting an objection that the district court sustained and an admonishment that the argument was improper. Jensen had denied committing the offense, and the jury was instructed to decide guilt based only on the evidence presented at trial.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Following a trial in the District Court of the Seventeenth Judicial District, Valley County, Jensen was convicted of criminal distribution of dangerous drugs. On appeal, she argued that prosecutorial comments during closing argument deprived her of a fair trial. The Montana Supreme Court affirmed the conviction and declined to exercise plain-error review of the unpreserved claims.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Cooper v. Hanson, 2010 MT 113, ¶ 28, 356 Mont. 309, 234 P.3d 59
- State v. Goodwin, 249 Mont. 1, 17, 813 P.2d 953, 963 (1991)
- State v. Ahto, 1998 MT 200, ¶ 32, 290 Mont. 338, 965 P.2d 240
- State v. Arigwe, 2007 MT 204, ¶ 164, 338 Mont. 442, 167 P.3d 815
- State v. Stewart, 2000 MT 379, ¶ 42, 303 Mont. 507, 16 P.3d 391
- State v. Gladue, 1999 MT 1, ¶¶ 27, 31, 293 Mont. 1, 972 P.2d 827
- State v. Criswell, 2013 MT 177, ¶ 50, 370 Mont. 511, 305 P.3d 760
- State v. Finley, 276 Mont. 126, 137, 915 P.2d 208, 215 (1996)
- State v. West, 2008 MT 338, ¶¶ 20, 23, 346 Mont. 244, 194 P.3d 683
- State v. Lindberg, 2008 MT 389, ¶¶ 30-34, 347 Mont. 76, 196 P.3d 1252
- State v. Raugust, 2000 MT 146, ¶¶ 42-43, 300 Mont. 54, 3 P.3d 115
- State v. Daniels, 2003 MT 247, ¶ 26, 317 Mont. 331, 77 P.3d 224
- State v. MacDonald, 2013 MT 97, ¶ 14, 369 Mont. 483, 299 P.3d 799
- State v. Parks, 2013 MT 280, ¶ 34, 372 Mont. 88, 310 P.3d 1088

OPINION

State v. Dawn M. Jensen

2013 MT 353N

PER CURIAM.

November 19 2013 DA 12-0409

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF MONTANA

2013 MT 353N

STATE OF MONTANA,

Plaintiff and Appellee, v.

DAWN MARIE JENSEN,

Defendant and Appellant. APPEAL FROM: District Court of the Seventeenth Judicial District, In and For the County of Valley, Cause No. DC 2011-26 Honorable John C. McKeon, Presiding Judge COUNSEL OF RECORD: For Appellant: Wade Zolynski, Chief Appellate Defender, Nicholas Domitrovich, Assistant Appellant Defender; Helena, Montana For Appellee: Timothy C. Fox, Montana Attorney General, Jonathan M. Krauss, Assistant Attorney General; Helena, Montana Nicholas Murnion, Valley County Attorney; Glasgow, Montana Submitted on Briefs: October 30, 2013 Decided: November 19, 2013 Filed:

Clerk Justice Michael E Wheat delivered the

Opinion of the Court. ¶1 Pursuant to Section I, Paragraph 3(d), Montana Supreme Court Internal Operating Rules, this case is decided by memorandum opinion and shall not be cited and does not serve as precedent. Its case title, cause number, and disposition shall be included in this Court's quarterly list of noncitable cases published in the Pacific Reporter and Montana Reports. ¶2 Dawn Marie Jensen (Jensen) appeals from her conviction at trial on one count of criminal distribution of dangerous drugs. We affirm. ¶3 The central issue on appeal is whether the prosecutor's remarks during closing deprived Jensen of a fair trial by invading the province of the jury. During closing, the State argued that its burden of proof was "not an unreasonable burden. Every defendant that's been convicted in the last 200 years has been convicted by proof beyond a reasonable doubt. It's only necessary to prove the elements of the crime beyond a reasonable doubt, not every little point that comes up." Later in the closing argument, the State also characterized the burden of proof as "using your common sense." The prosecutor also argued that its informant, Carrie Gartner, had no incentive to lie on the stand because she faced criminal prosecution for doing so. Jensen did not object to any of these statements. Finally, the State said that Jensen "refused to accept her consequences today." Jensen objected to that statement as an improper argument, and the District Court sustained that objection, admonishing the prosecution that the argument was not proper. ¶4 A district court's decision to grant a new trial in the interests of justice is reviewed for abuse of discretion. *Cooper v. Hanson*, 2010 MT 113, ¶ 28, 356 Mont. 309, 234 P.3d 59; 2 *State v. Goodwin*, 249 Mont. 1, 17, 813 P.2d 953, 963 (1991). In examining whether a district court abused its discretion in refusing a new trial, we consider (1) the strength of the evidence against the defendant; (2) the prejudicial effect of the alleged improper comments by the prosecutor; and (3) to what extent the district court's response cured any prejudice. *State v. Ahto*, 1998 MT 200, ¶ 32, 290 Mont. 338, 965 P.2d 240; *State v. Arigwe*, 2007 MT 204, ¶ 164, 338 Mont. 442, 167 P.3d 815. ¶5 The prosecutor's comments that Jensen did not "accept her consequences" were improper. Except for in capital cases, the jury should not be influenced in any way by sentencing factors, such as the acceptance of guilt. *State v. Stewart*, 2000 MT 379, ¶ 42, 303 Mont. 507, 16 P.3d 391. Jensen's acceptance of responsibility for the crime was irrelevant to the issues at trial and unsupported by any evidence or argument at trial. The District Court properly sustained Jensen's objection and admonished the prosecution for making the improper argument. ¶6 Even when comments are improper, however, a defendant must demonstrate that the prosecutor's comments prejudice his or her right to a fair and impartial trial. *State v. Gladue*, 1999 MT 1, ¶ 27, 293 Mont. 1, 972 P.2d 827; *State v. Stuit*, 268 Mont. 176, 185, 885 P.2d 1290, 1296 (1994). In *Criswell*, we found no prejudice resulting from a prosecutor's improper comments because jurors likely "saw those remarks for what they were: unprofessional and unnecessary disparagements of the defendants having no bearing on the question of guilt." *State v. Criswell*, 2013 MT 177, ¶ 50, 370 Mont. 511, 305 P.3d 760. 3 Finally, admonishment by the court may have a curative effect on any prejudice resulting from an improper comment. *Gladue*, ¶ 31; *Criswell*, ¶ 50. ¶7 The comment that Jensen "refused to accept her consequences," was largely irrelevant under the circumstances and

any resulting prejudice was insubstantial. Jensen argues that the prosecutor's comment caused the jury to punish Jensen for exercising her right to trial. But the entire focus of the trial was whether Jensen had actually committed the crime, and Jensen unequivocally denied committing the offense. The State did not argue or present evidence concerning Jensen's accountability for the crime, and the District Court properly instructed the jury to decide Jensen's guilt based only on the evidence presented at trial. The District Court sustained Jensen's objection and admonished the prosecution that the argument was improper. The curative effect of that admonishment and the jury instructions diminishes Jensen's claims of prejudice. ¶8 Jensen's remaining claims were not asserted at trial and are subject to plain error review. *State v. Finley*, 276 Mont. 126, 137, 915 P.2d 208, 215 (1996); *State v. West*, 2008 MT 338, ¶ 20, 346 Mont. 244, 194 P.3d 683. We employ plain error review sparingly on a case-by-case basis, and only when the claimed errors implicate a defendant's fundamental constitutional rights and result in a manifest miscarriage of justice. *State v. Parks*, 2013 MT 280, ¶ 34, 372 Mont. 88, 310 P.3d 1088; *State v. Daniels*, 2003 MT 247, ¶ 20, 317 Mont. 331, 77 P.3d 224; *West*, ¶ 23. ¶9 In *Lindberg*, a prosecutor questioned the defendant's credibility on the grounds that he failed to call any witnesses, and characterized one witness as a "liar." *State v. Lindberg*, 4 2008 MT 389, ¶ 33, 347 Mont. 76, 196 P.3d 1252. Although these statements were improper, we found under the totality of the circumstances that the statements did not shift the burden of proof to the defendant and did not cause prejudice. *Lindberg*, ¶¶ 30-34. In *Raugust*, we found that the comments "[r]easonable doubt has been used in every criminal case in this country" and "prisons are full of people who have been convicted beyond a reasonable doubt" were not improper because they merely demonstrated that reasonable doubt was not an impossible standard. *State v. Raugust*, 2000 MT 146, ¶¶ 42-43, 300 Mont. 54, 3 P.3d 115. Finally, while the State is prohibited from offering its personal view regarding the credibility of a witness, it is not prohibited from commenting on witness credibility based on inferences drawn from the evidence. *Daniels*, ¶ 26; *State v. MacDonald*, 2013 MT 97, ¶ 14, 369 Mont. 483, 299 P.3d 799. ¶10 We decline to employ plain error review of Jensen's remaining claims because none of the prosecutor's comments implicated the defendant's fundamental rights or cast unfairness into the trial. The prosecutor's comment that "[e]very defendant" in the last 200 years had been convicted beyond a reasonable doubt was meant to demonstrate that minor doubts and uncertainties did not warrant acquittal, just as in *Raugust*. Nor did the prosecution's comments improperly shift the burden of proof to Jensen. The prosecution told the jury that they should convict if they found that Jensen had committed the crime "based upon something you hear in this courtroom and using your common sense" This comment merely asked the jurors to evaluate the testimony and evidence based on common sense. The District Court properly instructed the jury regarding the actual definition of 5 reasonable doubt, dispelling any confusion created by the prosecution's "common sense" comment. Finally, the State did not make an improper comment by stating that its informant, Carrie Gartner, was disincentivized from lying by the threat of criminal prosecution. That argument is not the prosecutor's personal opinion on Gartner's credibility, but a logical

inference that Gartner has a reason to be trusted on the stand. As such, it is not an improper comment and causes no prejudice to Jensen's trial. Since none of these statements jeopardized Jensen's fundamental rights or cast unfairness into the trial, we decline to exercise plain error review of these issues. ¶11 For the foregoing reasons, Jensen's conviction is affirmed. ¶12 We have determined to decide this case pursuant to Section I, Paragraph 3(d), of our Internal Operating Rules, which provides for noncitable memorandum opinions.

/S/ MICHAEL E WHEAT

We Concur:

/S/ MIKE McGRATH

/S/ JIM RICE

/S/ BETH BAKER

/S/ LAURIE McKINNON

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