

People v Torres

2022 NY Slip Op 34782(U)

May 17, 2022

County Court, Westchester County

Docket Number: Indictment No. 22-70377-02

Judge: Anne E. Minihan

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COUNTY COURT: STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY OF WESTCHESTER

FILED

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

MAY 19 2022

TIMOTHY C. IDONI
COUNTY CLERK
COUNTY OF WESTCHESTER

-against-

JOHN TORRES

Defendant.

DECISION & ORDER
Indictment No. 22-70377-02

-----X
MINIHAN, J.

Defendant, John Torres, is charged by Westchester County Indictment Number 22-70377 with Criminal Facilitation in the Second Degree (Penal Law § 115.05) and Hindering Prosecution in the First Degree (Penal Law § 205.65) and is charged together with codefendant Wanda Veguilla with Tampering with Physical Evidence (Penal Law § 215.40[2]).

The indictment charges codefendant Wanda Veguilla, individually, with Murder in the Second Degree (Penal Law § 125.25[1]).

Defendant has filed an omnibus motion consisting of a Notice of Motion, an Affirmation in Support, and a Memorandum of Law. In response, the People filed an Affirmation in Opposition together with a Memorandum of Law.

I.

MOTION to INSPECT, DISMISS, and/or REDUCE
CPL ARTICLE 190

Defendant moves pursuant to CPL 210.20 to dismiss the indictment, or reduce the counts charged against him, on the grounds that the evidence before the Grand Jury was legally insufficient, and the Grand Jury proceeding was defective within the meaning of CPL 210.35. On consent of the People, the court has reviewed the minutes of the proceedings before the Grand Jury.

The court denies defendant's motion to dismiss or reduce the counts in the indictment for legally insufficient evidence because a review of the minutes reveals that the evidence presented, if accepted as true, would be legally sufficient to establish every element of the offenses charged, including that defendant was the person who committed them (*see* CPL 210.30 [2]). Pursuant to CPL 190.65(1), an indictment must be supported by legally sufficient evidence which establishes that the defendant committed the offenses charged. "Courts assessing the sufficiency of the evidence before a grand jury must evaluate whether the evidence, viewed most favorably to the People, if unexplained and uncontradicted--and deferring all questions as to the weight or quality of the evidence--would warrant conviction" (*People v Mills*, 1 NY3d 269, 274-275 [2002]). Legally sufficient evidence means competent evidence which, if accepted as true, would establish every element of an offense charged and the defendant's commission thereof (CPL 70.10[1]; *see People v Flowers*, 138 AD3d 1138, 1139 [2d Dept 2016]). "In the context of a

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Grand Jury proceeding, legal sufficiency means prima facie proof of the crimes charged, not proof beyond a reasonable doubt” (*People v Jessup*, 90 AD3d 782, 783 [2d Dept 2011]). “The reviewing court’s inquiry is limited to whether the facts, if proven, and the inferences that logically flow from those facts supply proof of every element of the charged crimes, and whether the Grand Jury could rationally have drawn the guilty inference. That other, innocent inferences could possibly be drawn from those facts is irrelevant to the sufficiency inquiry as long as the Grand Jury could rationally have drawn the guilty inference” (*People v Bello*, 92 NY2d 523, 526 [1998]). Here, the evidence presented, if accepted as true, is legally sufficient to establish every element of the offenses charged (CPL 210.30[2]).

With respect to defendant’s claim that the Grand Jury proceeding was defective within the meaning of CPL 210.35, a review of the minutes reveal that a quorum of the grand jurors was present during the presentation of evidence, and that the Assistant District Attorney properly instructed the Grand Jury on the law, including with respect to hearsay evidence, and only permitted those grand jurors who heard all the evidence to vote the matter (*see People v Collier*, 72 NY2d 298 [1988]; *People v Calbud*, 49 NY2d 389 [1980]; *People v Valles*, 62 NY2d 36 [1984]; *People v Burch*, 108 AD3d 679 [2d Dept 2013]).

Moreover, as to defendant’s specific claims in his Memorandum of Law, the Court finds that there were no unauthorized persons present in the Grand Jury, the indictment was not voted by an extended term of the Grand Jury, the presentation of evidence was not withdrawn prior to a vote being taken and then re-submitted, the prosecutor properly answered questions raised by the Grand Jurors, the prosecutor did not inject her personal opinions or beliefs or vouch for the credibility of witnesses, and the prosecutor’s legal instructions were understandable.

To the extent that defendant’s motion seeks disclosure of portions of the Grand Jury minutes beyond the disclosure directed by CPL Article 245, such as the prosecutor’s instructions and/or colloquies, the court denies that branch of the motion.

II.

MOTION to SUPPRESS a NOTICED STATEMENT

The People, pursuant to CPL 710.30(1)(a), noticed one statement allegedly made by defendant to members of the City of Yonkers Police Department on January 25, 2022. Defendant moves to suppress that statement as involuntary, made without *Miranda* warnings, and in violation of defendant’s right to counsel. Defendant’s motion to suppress is granted to the extent that a pre-trial *Huntley* hearing shall be held, on consent of the People, to determine whether the alleged statement was involuntarily made within the meaning of CPL 60.45 (*see* CPL 710.20[3]; CPL 710.60[3][b]; *People v Weaver*, 49 NY2d 1012 [1980]). The hearing will also address whether the alleged statement was obtained in violation of defendant’s Sixth Amendment right to counsel. If the statement is suppressed, the court will then determine whether any evidence obtained as a result of or due to that statement should be suppressed.

III.

MOTION to PRECLUDE NOTICED IDENTIFICATION TESTIMONY
CPL 710

Pursuant to CPL § 710.30(1)(b), the People served defendant with notice of an alleged identification of defendant made by a witness from a photographic array on December 15, 2021. Defendant's motion to suppress testimony of the noticed identification is granted to the limited extent of ordering a pre-trial *Wade* hearing (*see United States v Wade*, 388 US 218 [1967]). At the hearing, the People bear the initial burden of establishing the reasonableness of the police conduct and the lack of any undue suggestiveness (*see People v Chipp*, 75 NY2d 327, 335 [1990] *cert. denied* 498 US 833 [1990]; *People v Berrios*, 28 NY2d 361 [1971]). Once that burden is met, defendant bears the ultimate burden of proving that the procedure was unduly suggestive. Where suggestiveness is shown, the People must show the existence of an independent source by clear and convincing evidence.

IV.

MOTION for SEVERANCE and for a SEPARATE TRIAL

Defendant was properly joined in the indictment (CPL 200.40[1][d]). While the court may, in its discretion, and for good cause shown, order that defendant be tried separately, defendant failed to demonstrate good cause for severance. Good cause includes a showing that defendant would be "unduly prejudiced by a joint trial" (CPL 200.40[1]). Where the proof against all defendants is supplied by the same evidence, "only the most cogent reasons warrant a severance" (*People v Bornholdt*, 33 NY2d 75, 87 [1973]; *People v Kevin Watts*, 159 AD2d 740 [2d Dept 1990]). "[A] strong public policy favors joinder, because it expedites the judicial process, reduces court congestion, and avoids the necessity of recalling witnesses..." (*People v Mahboubian*, 74 NY2d 174, 183 [1989]).

Defendant's speculation that the codefendant would pursue an antagonistic defense is an insufficient basis to proceed with separate trials (*People v Chaplin*, 181 AD2d 828 [2d Dept 1992]). Additionally, defendant's claim that a severance is warranted because the noticed statements of his codefendant (and/or confessions) would be prejudicial as a *Bruton* violation is premature. In *Bruton v United States*, 391 US 123 [1968], the Supreme Court held that the admission of a confession made by one defendant, who does not testify, and which contains references implicating his codefendant, violates the latter's right of cross-examination under the confrontation clause. The court noted that there is a substantial risk that the jury, even with limiting instructions, may consider the implicating references in determining the codefendant's guilt. Unless the implicating references can be effectively deleted, the statement is not admissible unless separate trials are had. However, the New York Court of Appeals has defined certain instances where the *Bruton* rule would not be violated including where the confessing defendant testifies at the trial, thus affording the codefendant an opportunity to cross-examine her (*People v Anthony*, 24 NY2d 696 [1969]) and where the codefendant has himself confessed substantially to the same effect as the confessing defendant (*People v McNeil*, 24 NY2d 550 [1969]).

The hearing court must determine the admissibility and possibility of the redaction of the codefendant's statements and whether the codefendant will be testifying at defendant's trial.

Accordingly, the defendant's motion for severance is denied as premature, with leave to renew upon a determination of the admissibility of codefendant's alleged statements, and upon a showing that a joint trial will result in unfair prejudice to him and substantially impair his defense.

V.

MOTION for SANDOVAL and VENTIMIGLIA HEARINGS

Defendant has moved for a pre-trial hearing to permit the trial court to determine the extent, if at all, to which the People may inquire into defendant's prior criminal convictions or prior uncharged criminal, vicious, or immoral conduct. On the People's consent, the court orders a pre-trial *Sandoval* hearing (*see People v Sandoval*, 34 NY2d 371[1974]). At said hearing, the People shall notify defendant, *in compliance with CPL Article 245*, of all specific instances of his criminal, prior uncharged criminal, vicious, or immoral conduct of which they have knowledge and which they intend to use in an attempt to impeach defendant's credibility if he elects to testify at trial, *and, in any event, not less than 15 days prior to the first scheduled trial date*. Defendant shall bear the burden of identifying any instances of his prior misconduct that he submits the People should not be permitted to use to impeach his credibility. Defendant shall be required to identify the basis of his belief that each event or incident may be unduly prejudicial to his ability to testify as a witness on his own behalf (*see People v Matthews*, 68 NY2d 118 [1986]; *People v Malphurs*, 111 AD2d 266 [2d Dept 1985]).

If the People determine that they will seek to introduce evidence at trial of any prior uncharged misconduct and criminal acts of defendant, including acts sought to be used in their case in chief, they shall so notify the court and defense counsel, *in compliance with CPL Article 245, and, in any event, not less than 15 days prior to the first scheduled trial date*, and a *Ventimiglia/Molineux* hearing (*see People v Ventimiglia*, 52 NY2d 350 [1981]; *People v Molineux*, 168 NY 264 [1901]) shall be held immediately prior to trial to determine whether or not any evidence of uncharged crimes may be so used by the People. The People are urged to make an appropriate decision in this regard sufficiently in advance of trial to allow any *Ventimiglia/Molineux* hearing to be consolidated and held with the other hearings herein.

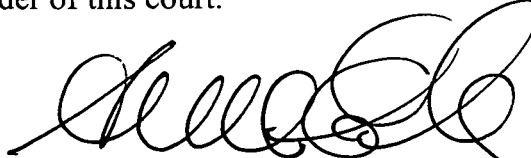
VI.

LEAVE TO MAKE ADDITIONAL MOTIONS

Defendant's motion for leave to make additional motions is denied. Defendant must demonstrate good cause for any further pre-trial motion for omnibus relief, in accordance with CPL 255.20(3).

The foregoing constitutes the decision and order of this court.

Dated: White Plains, New York
May 17, 2022



Honorable Anne E. Minihan
Acting Justice of the Supreme Court