

## Fugitive millionaire who butchered friend's body acquitted of murder

By Charles Bagli in Galveston, Texas

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Robert Durst, a New York multimillionaire who admitted that he had butchered his 71-year-old neighbour's body with a saw and dumped the parts into Galveston Bay, has been acquitted of murder.

Durst, 60, told the jury that despite what happened afterwards, the killing had been accidental and an act of self-defence.

For many in court in Galveston, Texas, on Tuesday, it was a surprise ending to a strange trial. When the verdict was read, in a scene televised live nationally, Durst looked stunned, mouth agape as he gazed upward. A tight smile spread across his face, then he hugged his lawyers, softly saying, "Thank you so much."

But the verdict was no stranger than anything else heard over six weeks of testimony: a troubled multimillionaire, living on the cheap disguised as a woman; the unsolved disappearance of his first wife; the unsolved murder of his confidante in Los Angeles; a secret second marriage; a fatal shooting and a grisly cover-up; a nationwide manhunt that ended with a shoplifting arrest.

Jurors, who deliberated over four days, said outside court that there were holes in Durst's story, but that ultimately the prosecution had failed to prove that he deliberately murdered his neighbour, Morris Black.

Durst testified that in November 2000 he fled New York for Galveston because he had learned that Jeanine Pirro, a district attorney, had reopened an investigation into his first wife's disappearance, and he feared she would indict him unfairly to further her political ambitions. Disguised as a mute woman, Durst rented a flat and disappeared among the town's drifters.

He testified that he hated the wig he wore and soon abandoned his disguise. Mr Black, a cantankerous former seaman, lived across the hall. Although Mr Black often got into arguments with strangers and neighbours, Durst said the two men became fast friends, watching television together and target shooting.

On September 28, 2001, Durst said, he returned to his flat shortly before dawn and found Mr Black watching television. He said he had raced into the kitchen, where he discovered that his .22-calibre handgun was not in its hiding place. He turned to see Mr Black reaching for the weapon underneath a jacket and swinging towards him, Durst said. "I was concerned that Morris was going to shoot the gun, most likely at my face," he told the jury.

He testified that they had struggled and the gun had gone off in Mr Black's face, killing him.

Durst said he panicked. In a haze of drugs and alcohol, he carved up Mr Black's body until he was "swimming in blood". He wrapped the body parts in rubbish bags and dumped them in Galveston Bay, where they were found bobbing in the water. The head has not been recovered.

Durst was arrested and charged with murder, but he later jumped bail, fleeing to Pennsylvania, where he was captured. He still faces charges of bail-jumping, a felony. Prosecutors said they did not plan to charge him with abuse of a corpse, a misdemeanour.

Durst's first brush with the authorities came in 1982 when he told police he had not seen his first wife, Kathleen, in five days. Kathleen had told many friends, "If anything happens to me, don't let him get away with it," said one of them, Marion Watlington.

In December 2000, Durst secretly married Debrah Lee Charatan, a New York estate agent. His friend and confidante, Susan Berman, was found dead that month in her Los Angeles home, shot in the back of the head.