

The Basket Maker

*A close adaptation of B. Traven's story "Assembly Line"
for the children of Timbaktu schools*

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Scene One

(A street lined with houses in the city of Oaxaca, Mexico. In the distance, we hear the cries of an Indian campesino, selling baskets.)

Campesino (*from offstage*): Canastitas! Canastitas! Señores, señoras, canastitas!

(The cries of the Campesino come closer and closer until he enters the stage, carrying a bundle of bright, colorful, intricately woven baskets. He approaches the door of one of the houses.)

Campesino: Señora? Señora?

First Woman (*from inside the house*): Oi!

Campesino: Canastitas, señora! Would you like to buy some canastitas?

First Woman (*from inside the house*): What?!

Campesino: Canastitas! Canastitas!

(The First Woman opens the door and peers out, obviously irritated.)

First Woman: What do you want?

Campesino: Señora, would you like—

First Woman: We don't give to beggars.

Campesino: Oh no, señora, I'm not—

First Woman: Why don't you get yourself back to your pueblo, indio.

Campesino: Señora, you might like—

First Woman: Go! We're not interested. Go, go go!

(She slams the door closed. The Campesino continues on to the next door.)

Campesino: Señora! Señora! Canastitas!

(Silence.)

Campesino: Señora?

(After a pause, he moves on to the next house.)

Campesino: Señora! Señora! Canastitas!

(The Second Woman opens the door.)

Second Woman: Canastitas?

Campesino: Sí, señora! Canastitas for your home.

Second Woman: Tell me, indio, how much are you asking?

Campesino: Only fifty centavos, señora.

Second Woman: My god! You must be kidding me. Fifty centavos for this little thing?

Campesino: Señora, you must first look at the colors and at the weaving.

Second Woman: This dirty petate straw can be picked up by anyone in the jungle. You can't fool me, indio.

Campesino: Each basket is unique, señora.

Second Woman *(pulling a basket out of the bundle)*: They're so small. What good are they for, anyway?

Campesino: Señora, you can keep your needles in it, or give color to this window sill.

Second Woman: If I were to pay even ten centavos for this, you should be grateful and kiss my hand.

Campesino: Señora, I can't take less than forty centavos.

Second Woman: You little thief. You ought to be ashamed to ask such a price.

Campesino: Señora—

Second Woman: But I'm feeling generous today and would be willing to pay you twenty centavos. What do you say, indio?

Campesino: Señora, anything lower than thirty centavos—

Second Woman: Twenty centavos. I won't give more than that.

Campesino: Señora, for you I would be willing to go as low as twenty-five centavos.

Second Woman: Twenty-five, you say?

Campesino: Sí, señora. Twenty-five centavos.

(She looks at the basket in her hand and then finally agrees.)

Second Woman: Okay. It's too much, but I guess today's just your lucky day. Wait here. I'll bring your twenty-five centavos.

(The Second Woman goes inside the house.)

Second Woman *(from inside)*: Hey indio!

Campesino: Yes, señora?

Second Woman *(from inside)*: You have change, no? I can't seem to find . . .

Campesino: Señora, I have only—

(The Second Woman appears at the door again, a bit too soon.)

Second Woman: Now what do you think of that. I've got only twenty centavos change on me.

Campesino: But señora—

Second Woman: What can I do? Can you change me a twenty peso note? Two thousand centavos?

Campesino: Señora, surely—

Second Woman: I simply don't have any other change. Just take it. Twenty centavos. Unless you want to find someone to give me change for this note.

(pause)

Campesino: Thank you, señora. Muchas gracias.

(The Second Woman goes inside her house. The Campesino continues on to the next door.)

Campesino: Señora! Señora! Canastitas!

(The Third Woman opens the door.)

Third Woman: Oh look at these little baskets.

Campesino: Señora, would you like to buy some canastitas?

Third Woman *(picking one out of his bundle)*: They're so cute. I'll give you ten centavos.

Campesino: Señora! The price is fifty centavos.

Third Woman: In your dreams, little indio. Ten centavos or you can haul your little baskets all the way home again. It's getting dark, don't you think?

Campesino: Señora, consider the quality of the bast and the colors and the weaving. I can't take less than forty centavos.

Third Woman: Don't play games with me, little indio. Where are you from, anyway? Which is your pueblo?

Campesino: Huehuetonoc, Señora.

Third Woman: All the way from Huehuetonoc? And no burro?

Campesino: Señora, our burro got loose three days back. We'll find him of course, we always find him, but yes this time I had to walk.

Third Woman: You walked? Poor thing. Here, take your ten centavos. Consider it charity. I know it's a waste. But I am, after all, a Christian and I can't see a poor Indian die of hunger, especially after coming all this way from his village.

(She tosses the basket carelessly into her house.)

Campesino: Señora!

Third Woman: You said you're from Huehuetonoc, no? Listen here. Can't you bring me next Saturday two or three turkeys from your pueblo? They must be heavy and fat and very very cheap. Otherwise I won't even touch them. I can easily get them for the regular price here, understand? Three big cheap turkeys, Saturday. Okay? Now hop along, indio.

(The Third Woman closes the door to her house. Clearly tired, the Campesino picks up his

bundle, looking at how many baskets he hasn't yet sold. He puts the bundle on his back and continues along the street.)

Campesino: Canastitas! Canastitas! Canastitas for sale! *(He looks at all the closed doors, silent in the early evening, and sighs.)* Canastitas. Canastitas.

Scene Two

(The earthen-floor porch of the Campesino's palm-leaf hut. The Campesino is squatting on the ground, busy at work on a new series of baskets. From inside the house his wife peers out the open front door, carrying a steaming clay pot.)

The Campesino's Wife: Oye, come in for dinner.

Campesino: I'll be right there.

(The Campesino shows no sign of changing his speed or slacking in his attention and continues his work as patiently as before. His wife puts the pot down and calls out again.)

The Campesino's Wife: Come and eat while the beans are still hot.

Campesino: I'll just finish this bit here.

(The campesino continues to work without haste.)

The Campesino's Wife: Is it true they raised the fees at the market?

Campesino: Sí, from fifteen to twenty centavos.

The Campesino's Wife: And still the baskets don't all sell, do they? Still you have to go from door to door after the market is over. Ten centavos for a basket!

Campesino: Only the last one.

The Campesino's Wife *(pointing to the unsold baskets, resting beside him on the porch)*: And these?

Campesino: I'll take them the next market day.

The Campesino's Wife: I hope the next market day will treat us better. *(Looking at the basket in the Campesino's hands)* Oh, it's the butterfly who visited us yesterday.

Campesino: Yes, and this morning too. It liked the basket I set over there—sat on it. And I thought let's make our next basket after her colors.

The Campesino's Wife: Well, come in after the light fades.

(She reenters the house. As the Campesino works, Mr. E. L. Winthrop, an American tourist, wanders down the lane and comes to stand in front of the Campesino, watching him work. The Campesino hardly pays any attention to him. As the time passes, Mr. Winthrop starts to feel uncomfortable and decides to say something.)

Mr. Winthrop: How much for that little basket, friend?

Campesino: Fifty centavos, patron, my good lord. One half a peso.

Mr. Winthrop (*amazed*): Fifty centavos! That's all? Great, sold! (*At the outburst of sound, the Campesino's Wife peers out the door again, watching silently. Mr. Winthrop, unaware of her, picks up and looks at his new buy.*) I know exactly who I'll give this to. She'll give me a kiss, for sure. Wonder what she'll use it for. (*He hands the money to the Campesino, who barely looks at it, then says to himself:*) Only fifty centavos. I thought it would be at least six times that much, three or even four pesos. Why at fifty centavos a piece, I could . . . hey . . .

(Mr. Winthrop takes a piece of scrap paper out of his pocket and starts writing numbers furiously. The Campesino continues his work as before.)

Mr. Winthrop: Friend, let me ask you a question.

Campesino: Of course, my patron.

Mr. Winthrop: Suppose I buy ten of these little baskets of yours. Of course, we both know they have no practical use whatsoever. But still, suppose I buy ten. How much would you ask for each?

Campesino (*after a moment of thought*): If you buy ten I can let you have them for forty-five centavos each, señor gentleman.

Mr. Winthrop (*writing on his scrap of paper*): Good, good. And then, amigo, let's suppose that instead of ten, I buy one hundred of these absolutely useless baskets. If I buy one hundred, how much will each cost me?

Campesino (*not looking up from his work and without the slightest trace of enthusiasm*): In such a case I might not be quite unwilling to sell each for forty centavos.

Mr. Winthrop (*writing this also on his piece of paper*): In that case . . . I'll buy a hundred.

Campesino: Señor, I don't quite have one hundred baskets.

Mr. Winthrop: Well then I'll take however many you have.

Campesino (*without stopping his work*): All the finished baskets are over in that bundle, señor.

Mr. Winthrop (*going over and counting*): One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten,

eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.

Campesino: Fifteen, is it, señor?

Mr. Winthrop (*handing the Campesino the money*): Here is your money for fifteen.

Campesino: Thank you señor. Muchas gracias.

(*Mr. Winthrop gathers his baskets together and leaves. After he's gone, his wife ventures back onto the porch.*)

The Campesino's Wife: Where do you think the gringo's from?

Campesino: Who knows. He didn't say.

The Campesino's Wife: Well, good to have finally sold them all.

Campesino: They seem to have some money.

The Campesino's Wife (*looking at the basket in the Campesino's hands*): This one is turning out nicely.

Campesino: Yes. It was a beautiful butterfly.

The Campesino's Wife: The light's almost gone. Let's eat.

Scene Three

(*A confectioner's shop in New York City. Mr. Kemple, the shop's owner, stands behind the display of expensive hand-made chocolates. Mr. Winthrop, dressed in a coat and tie, enters carrying a large case which carries the canastitas he bought in Oaxaca.*)

Mr. Winthrop: Good morning, Mr. Kemple.

Mr. Kemple: Good morning. You must be Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Winthrop: Winthrop.

Mr. Kemple: Yes, Mr. Winthrop. I got the message that you called. I understand you wanted to order some of our special chocolates?

Mr. Winthrop: Not exactly, Mr. Kemple. I had rather thought I might have something for you, to bring yet even greater renown to your already well-known confections. As the most famous maker of sweets in all of New York City, you are the most suitable person for the extraordinary offer I have to make.

Mr. Kemple: What exactly to you mean, Mr. Wilson?

Mr. Winthrop: Winthrop.

Mr. Kemple: Yes of course.

Mr. Winthrop (*opening and displaying his collection of baskets*): I can offer you one of the most artistic and at the same time most original of boxes. These little baskets, I do believe, would be just right to package the most expensive chocolates you sell, the ones people give as elegant and high-priced gifts. Have a look.

(*Mr. Kemple is obviously stunned by the baskets and catches his breath. Quickly, though, he recomposes himself and returns to his former demeanor.*)

Mr. Kemple: Well, I don't know. It isn't quite what I'm after. However . . . perhaps it might be worth a try. Of course, it would depend on the price. We certainly wouldn't want the packaging to cost more than the chocolates themselves.

Mr. Winthrop: Do I hear an offer?

Mr. Kemple: Why don't you give me some idea what you would want for them?

Mr. Winthrop: Well, Mr. Kemple, since I am, after all, the smart guy who braved the jungles of the world to discover these baskets, and since I am, in addition, the only Jack who knows how to get his hands on more of them, I will only sell to the highest bidder. They would get exclusive rights, of course. I'm sure you can see what I'm getting at.

Mr. Kemple: Quite so. May I ask if you have any other bidders?

Mr. Winthrop (*lying*): There are, in fact, a number of offers. Many many offers. But I have you first and foremost in mind and would hate to see you miss this opportunity.

Mr. Kemple: Normally I would ask to talk this over with my business partners . . .

Mr. Winthrop: I'm sure, just like all the other executives now discussing these very boxes with *their* business partners.

Mr. Kemple: But perhaps in this case . . .

Mr. Winthrop: Yes?

Mr. Kemple: Let me be frank with you. I know art when I see it, and these little baskets are superb works of art. We are, after all, merely sellers of sweets. The only real use we would have for these baskets would be as packages for our special French pralines. They wouldn't, that is, be anything more than wrappings—fine wrappings, perhaps, but nonetheless wrappings. I'm sure, Mr. Winthrop, you can see it our way. We have to work with certain limitations.

Mr. Winthrop: Of course. So tell me, what would these be worth to you?

Mr. Kemple: You'll understand, I'm sure, that we do have a budget and at the same time a respect and regard for the eye of our customers. . . . Here's my offer. We would be able to pay a dollar and a quarter apiece, and not one cent more. Take it or leave it.

(Mr. Winthrop, in surprise at the high price, nearly jumps.)

Mr. Kemple: All right, all right, no reason to get excited. Perhaps we might go as high as one-fifty.

Mr. Winthrop: Make it one-seventy-five.

Mr. Kemple: Sold. One-seventy-five apiece free at port of New York. We pay the customs and you pay the shipping. Right?

Mr. Winthrop: Right.

(Mr. Winthrop and Mr. Kemple shake hands.)

Mr. Kemple. I'll have the papers made up immediately. Send them to my assistant, signed.
Mr. Winthrop: With pleasure.

Mr. Kemple: These is, of course, one condition. We need a lot of these baskets, no less than ten thousand. And they must come in no less that twelve different patterns and designs.

Mr. Winthrop: I'll give you sixty different designs.

Mr. Kemple: All the better. And we must have them in early October, no later. You *will* be able to deliver, won't you?

Mr. Winthrop: Absolutely.

Scene Four

(The Campesino's porch. The Campesino is sitting as before, at work on his baskets. Mr. Winthrop enters, carrying a packet of papers.)

Mr. Winthrop: Buenas tardes, amigo, how are you?

(The Campesino rises, takes off his hat, and bows politely.)

Campesino: Welcome, patron. Thank you, I feel fine, thank you. Muy buenas tardes. This house and all I have is at your kind disposal. *(He bows again, then sits and returns to his work.)* Pardon me, patron, but I cannot afford to waste the daylight.

Mr. Winthrop: That may soon change, my friend. I've got big business for you.

Campesino: Good to hear that, señor.

Mr. Winthrop: Do you think you can make me one thousand of these little baskets?

Campesino: Why not patron? If I can make fifteen, I can make one thousand also.

Mr. Winthrop: That's right, my good man. Can you also make me five thousand?

Campesino: Of course, señor. I can make five thousand if I can make one thousand.

Mr. Winthrop: Good. Now, if I asked you to make me ten thousand, what would you say? And what would be the price for each? You *can* make ten thousand, can't you?

Campesino: Of course I can, señor. I can make as many as you wish. I am an expert in this sort of work. No one else in the whole state of Oaxaca can make them the way I do.

Mr. Winthrop: That's exactly what I thought. Now, if I order ten thousand baskets, how much time would you need to finish them?

(The Campesino works it out in his head as he continues to work with his hands.)

Campesino: It will take a good long time to make so many baskets, patron. See, the bast and fibers must be dried very carefully. You have to work with them so that they remain soft and don't lose their natural brilliance. Even when dry, they must look fresh. Then they have to be dyed. For the dyes, I have to collect plants and roots and barks and insects. This takes time. The plants must be gathered when the moon is just right or they won't give the right color. The insects must also be gathered at the right time and under the right conditions or else they won't produce rich colors and are just like dust. But of course, patron, I can make as many of these canastitas as you wish, even as many as three dozen if you want them. Only give me time.

Mr. Winthrop: Three dozen? Three dozen! Three dozen! *(At hearing Mr. Winthrop cry out, the Campesino's Wife appears at the door to see what's going on.)* Okay, wait. Look. Let's try this again. You told me that if I buy one hundred baskets you'll sell them for forty centavos each, right?

Campesino: That's right, señor.

Mr. Winthrop: Now, if I ask you to make me one thousand, that is, ten times one hundred, how much will each basket cost?

(For the first time since Mr. Winthrop arrived, the Campesino stops working. He shakes his head and looks at his wife several times, trying to figure out the amount. Finally he speaks again.)

Campesino: Excuse me, patron, that is by far too much for me to count. Tomorrow, if you will

do me the honor, come and see me again and I think I shall have my answer ready for you.

Mr. Winthrop: Tomorrow? Tomorrow! Okay, okay, I'll give you one day, but you must have an answer for me when I return.

(Mr. Winthrop leaves.)

The Campesino's Wife: Oye! Ten thousand baskets? Who could possibly want ten thousand baskets?

Campesino: You will have to help me figure out the price. It will take a long time.

The Campesino's Wife: But what can he be thinking? Ten thousand baskets . . .

Campesino: Who can understand these people? But he has asked and so we must try to give him an answer.

The Campesino's Wife: Come in and eat first. The light's almost gone and you'll need tortillas in your belly to figure this one out.

Scene Five

(The next day. As usual, the Campesino is at work on his porch. Mr. Winthrop comes rushing in with his packet of papers.)

Mr. Winthrop: So have you got the price for ten thousand yet?

Campesino: Sí, my patron. I have the price ready. It has cost me much labor and worry to find out the exact price, because, you see, I do not wish to cheat you out of your honest money.

Mr. Winthrop: Yeah, yeah. Out with it now. What's the price?

Campesino: We spent the entire night to work it out exactly. If I have to make one thousand canastitas, each will be three pesos, that is, three hundred centavos. If I have to make five thousand, each will cost nine pesos. And if I have to make ten thousand, in such a case I can't make them for less than fifteen pesos each.

(Immediately he returns to work.)

Mr. Winthrop *(after a stunned pause)*: Wait. Wait. Did I hear you say *fifteen pesos each*?

Campesino: That's exactly and without any mistake what I said.

Mr. Winthrop: But, look here, my good man. I'm your friend and I want to help you get on your feet.

Campesino: Yes, patron, I know this and I don't doubt any of your words.

Mr. Winthrop: But I don't understand. You said each basket would cost forty centavos if you made one hundred.

Campesino: That's right. If you buy a hundred you can have them for forty centavos apiece, that is, if I had a hundred, which I don't.

Mr. Winthrop: But shouldn't it be even more cheap if I buy even more? I can't understand why the price suddenly jumps to fifteen pesos—one thousand five hundred centavos—nearly forty times more expensive. How can that be?

Campesino: My dear patron. What is there so difficult to understand? It's all very simple. One thousand canastitas would cost me a hundred times more work than a dozen. Ten thousand canastitas would cost me so much time and labor that I could never finish them, not even in a hundred years. I would need to find the fibers and seek out hundreds more plants and roots and bark and insects. You can't just go into the forest and find it lying at your feet. One root with the true violet blue I seek may cost me four or five days until I can find one. And do you know how much work and time it takes to prepare the fibers? And you must remember that this is not my main occupation. My main work is to care for my fields, for my corn and my beans and my goats and my chickens. If I have to make so many baskets, who will take care of my livelihood? If I have no corn, then I have no tortillas to eat, and if I grow no beans, where do I get my frijoles from?

Mr. Winthrop: But I'll give you so much money for your baskets that you can buy all the corn and beans that you need and more.

Campesino: That is what you think, señor. You must understand that it is only the corn I grow myself that I am sure of. Of the corn which others may or may not grow, I cannot be sure to feast upon.

Mr. Winthrop: But can't you get some of your relatives to help you out? Don't you have any relatives around?

Campesino: Oh I have a lot of relatives here. Practically everyone in the village is related to me.

Mr. Winthrop: Then you can have them look after your fields and goats while you make baskets for me. Maybe they could even gather the fibers and plants and roots and insects.

Campesino: Yes, perhaps, they might. Possibly. But then who would take care of *their* fields and *their* goats and chickens? Then nobody would work in the fields and the price of corn and beans would go so high that none of us could buy any at all and we would all starve to death. And so I would have to raise the price of my baskets too. Now I hope you can see why I can't make the baskets cheaper than fifteen pesos each if I had to make that many.

Mr. Winthrop (*clearly flustered*): Perhaps, perhaps you still don't understand exactly what I'm

offering you. Opportunity, as you know, only knocks once. You will never have a chance like this again. Let me explain in cold solid numbers how much money you will miss out on if you let this deal pass you by. See, I've already worked it all out here.

(Mr. Winthrop shows the Campesino the packet of papers in his hand.)

Mr. Winthrop: See, here it all is. Here's what you sell me, here's for how much—forty centavos, remember?

Campesino: And this?

Mr. Winthrop: That's nothing. Has only to do with how much I sell them for, which doesn't matter. See, if you sell me ten thousand baskets at forty centavos apiece, you will get *four hundred thousand centavos*. That's *four thousand pesos*. You'll be the richest person in the state of Oaxaca and since you're my friend, I'll throw in a bonus, just out of friendship. I'll give you a total of *five thousand pesos* for the whole lot. What do you say? Is it a deal or is it a deal? Say yes and I'll give you an advance even before you begin.

Campesino: As I explained before, my patron, the price is fifteen pesos each.

Mr. Winthrop (*shouting now*): But my good man! Where have you been all this time? On the moon? Are you deaf? You haven't changed your price at all.

Campesino: Yes, I am well aware of it, my lord. It must be the same price because I cannot make any other one. And there's still another thing that perhaps you don't know. You see, my good patron, I've got to make these canastitas in my own way and with my song in them and with bits of my soul woven into them. If I have to make them in great numbers there would no longer be my soul in each, or my song. Each would look like the other with no difference whatever and such a thing would slowly eat up my heart. Each has to be another song which I hear in the morning when the sun rises and the birds begin to chirp and the butterflies come and sit down on my baskets so I may see a new beauty, because, you see, the butterflies like my baskets and the pretty colors on them, that's why they come and sit down, and I can make my canastitas after them. And now, señor, if you will kindly excuse me, I have wasted much time already, though it was a pleasure and a great honor to hear the talk of such a distinguished gentleman as yourself. But I'm afraid I have to attend to my work now, for the day after tomorrow is a market day in town and I have to take my baskets there. Thank you, señor, for your visit. Adios.

(Flustered and bewildered, Mr. Wilson stands absolutely still, not knowing what to do or think. One by one the papers slip from his fingers and onto the ground. Then he looks down at the scattered sheets, at the campesino who is back at his work, and turns and walks slowly away. The Campesino's Wife, who has been listening from inside the house, comes out and joins her husband on the porch.)

The Campesino's Wife: Well, I figured as much. Who would have wanted all that work? As if we didn't have plenty already.

Campesino: You should have seen his papers, all covered in scribbles and numbers and lines. He must have had some dream.

The Campesino's Wife: Ten thousand baskets. Who could ever want ten thousand baskets?

Campesino: I can't think of ten thousand baskets. I can't even think of twenty.

The Campesino's Wife (*looking at the basket he's working on*): It's a new butterfly.

Campesino: Came visiting yesterday.

The Campesino's Wife: And a new song.

Campesino: Yes, a new song.

(*End.*)

21 September 2004

Notes on the Spanish words in the play

Oaxaca - pronounced "wa HA ka"

campesino - peasant

señor - mister

señores - gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen

señora - madam, Mrs.

señoras - ladies

pueblo - town or village; it can also mean "people" as in "the people"

indio - Indian, in the sense of indigenous person and not always a friendly word

sí - yes

muchas gracias - thank you very much

Huehuetonoc - the "h" is silent

amigo - friend

gringo - foreigner, north american

buenas tardes - good evening

muy - very

tortillas - a bread similar to chappati, made of corn flour (the "ll" is pronounced like "y")

frijoles - beans (the "j" is pronounced something like an "h")

adios - goodbye