

A Tailor of Florence

45-minute play for radio by Jo-Ann Challis

In fourteenth-century Florence an ambitious tailor secures work in a prosperous household but risks his reputation when he accepts an unexpected sartorial task that flouts the city's stringent fashion laws.

In Renaissance Florence, clothes mattered. They were a symbol of your occupation, your status and your worth. And there were rules – hundreds of them – dictating exactly what you could wear, especially if you were a woman. Disobey those rules, and the fashion police were after you. 'Exactly how wide are those sleeves, madam?' 'What sort of fur is that round your neck?' 'Is that a leather belt you're wearing?'

And it wasn't just the wearer of the offending garment who was in trouble. The tailor who'd made it was considered doubly guilty ...

Inspired by numerous historical offences, this play tells the story of one such fashion crime.

MARCO DI MARCO is a young and ambitious tailor, grafting to make a name for himself amongst the leading families in Florence. He finds work with FRANCESCO, a well-to-do merchant who's been elected to the city's ruling council. Marco is determined that this job will lead to more work with increasingly influential families, and finally to owning his own business.

But Marco risks his dreams when he is approached by the merchant's domestic slave, AMINA, with a request from the merchant's soon-to-be-married daughter GIULIANA. She wants him to make a dress, an extravagant, outrageous dress, with towering, jewel-studded headdress, a dress that breaks all the laws. But this dress isn't for her; it's for Amina, as a reward for her faithful friendship.

At first Marco refuses. It would be professional suicide. No family of any standing would employ him if it's discovered. But Amina is persuasive, and beautiful, and Marco wavers. After all, people get away with breaking the fashion laws all the time. Look at the merchant's neighbours, for example, whose flamboyant outfits infuriate the straight-laced merchant. And Amina's future is bleak: she'll be sold to the highest bidder once Giuliana is married. At least the dress would give her some sort of financial independence as she could sell it piece by piece. Marco is finally convinced, swayed by Amina's dark, imploring eyes.

While the merchant is away serving on the council, Marco works in his house – making fine but conservative gowns for Giuliana and CATERINA, her mother, by day, and the dazzling but illegal ensemble for Amina by night.

But the merchant is taking advantage of his seat on the council to trap citizens flouting the fashion laws. He demands that all properties in Florence be searched, not realising that a dress representing everything he despises is taking shape under his own roof.

This is a story about business and politics, about love and ambition, and about using whatever you can to get what you want – when all you can use is a dress.
