

# A Transcendent JOURNEY

*Jane the Virgin's* Justin Baldoni on how his faith led him to creating *My Last Days*, starting his own company, and to his wife

Words by Vanessa Pascale • Photo Credit: TJ Manou

The London NYC is buzzing with people streaming in and out of its lobby, which is where I find Justin Baldoni, his wife Emily, and 10-month-old daughter Maiya. It's mid-May and many of primetime's actors are in Manhattan for the TV Upfronts and are staying at the hotel, Justin tells me. This explains the small crowd gathered out front. NBC Universal, FOX, The CW, and various other networks host gatherings this week attended by their TV stars, major advertisers, and press to encourage marketers to buy television commercial airtime "up front." To escape the chaos down here, Justin, who is casually dressed in a white v-neck tee and black baseball cap, suggests that we conduct the interview in their hotel room.

Justin and I take a seat on the couch in the room's living room, while Emily takes Maiya into the bedroom separated by windowed double doors. Justin plays Rafael Solano, the biological father of Jane's child/Marbella Hotel owner, on The CW's *Jane the Virgin*. The comedy-drama telenovela, set in Miami, has received several nominations and awards including a Golden Globe nomination for Best Television Series --Musical or Comedy (the first show in The CW history to receive this honor) and was the winner of AFI's Television Program of the Year. "Last season ended with Michael getting shot and Rafael making love to who he thought was his ex-wife, Petra. But

in reality, she was Petra's twin sister who had just drugged Petra and put her in the hospital and now is pretending to be Petra." He laughs. The show resumes filming for season three in early August, and returns October 17th.

But you can still catch Justin on The CW this August as he has teamed up with the network on his passion project. The second season of Justin's popular docuseries, *My Last Days* will air over a 3-night span, August 17, 18, and 19 at 8 p.m. The first season (2012) became the most watched documentary series online ever with 30+million views. And because of its success, Warner Bros. is developing the feature film, *Clouds*, which Justin will direct and produce. What sparked this passion project? "I was raised in the Bahá'í Faith and in the Bahá'í Faith there's a lot of teachings about life after death, our purpose, and why we're here in this world." At a young age, Justin was curious about life after death and harbored a "desire to be around people as they were older and sick." He recollects how he enjoyed hanging out with his grandparents and asking them questions about their story while filming them. Then at 20, Justin had a "profound experience" when his uncle passed away. He was the only one who could stay composed during his "hard passing." "It really opened my eyes to this other world of possibilities," he remembers. "And there's this quote, 'I've made death the messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve?'"

Eight years later, during a lull in his acting career, Justin had a vision for a show that would push people to look at how beautiful and fragile life is. "It was a show designed around people that were dying of a terminal illness, but were choosing happiness and to live full, complete beautiful lives that were focused on service and various things. I thought: If we could really get people to watch a show like this, it would help them remember that they don't have to wait to find out they're dying to start living." Justin partnered with friend Rainn Wilson, co-founder of media and entertainment company SoulPancake, on this idea that "everybody said nobody would watch." 30+million views later, they knew they were onto something. "It helped people realize that there actually is a market for emotional content and you don't have to create 4-minute YouTube videos for things to go viral. You can create meaningful stories."

From there, Justin started his company Wayfarer Entertainment, which focuses on creating branded content, television commercials, films, etc. "Everything is about helping us remember the beauty of life and that looks like a ton of different things," he says ardently. After *Jane the Virgin* wrapped last year and seven days after Maiya's birth, Justin took off for a month to shoot six new documentaries all over the country that will comprise season two of *My Last Days*. "I'm hosting it. It's a journey into the meaning of life through six extraordinary individuals that are living beautiful lives. It's a really life-affirming, inspirational show. No one that's been on this season has passed away --everyone is doing really

well." In our almost-one-hour long interview, Justin's passion for life is palpable.

Unfortunately my computer crashed last month, and I lost the voice recording from our sit-down in May, so to help me fill in the blanks, Justin hopped on to an impromptu call with me in late-July while he was on vacation in Sweden with Emily and her family. If you follow Justin on social media, you know that he is a bona fide family man. His Instagram is bursting with heartwarming family photos, hashtags like #DearMaiya, and deep musings. In their presence, the love is even more obvious and as I observe the Baldoni family's sweet interaction, I find myself asking Justin about their story.

Emily and Justin's first encounter was at a party for a movie they would've played opposite of each other in -- if Justin signed on for the reshoot of the "really awful horror movie" he acted in. He declined, and the film was reshot with a new cast that included Emily. Both in relationships at the time, they continued to run into one another around town. "We reconnected at a commercial audition the week we both broke up with our exes, and we just kinda said hi. A full year later, that exact week at another commercial audition, we ran into each other and there were sparks. It was all about timing and growth. We had both went on spiritual journeys to find ourselves and find God that year and we came back and were like, 'Whoa! I don't remember you like that, but hi! And it was beautiful.'"

Justin invited Emily to The Spiritual Talk, a group --open to everyone and rooted in the Bahá'í writings: "Bahá'ís believe that we're all one and we're all the same." --he hosted at his house. The whole idea was to have a spiritual conversation that was open to any belief that was nondiscriminatory and nonjudgmental." The group would also do acts of service together. "We kinda built our relationship through that experience and through being of service together and putting God in the middle of our relationship. It was really cool. It was kinda backwards and counterintuitive to any way that we're taught to date today. I think that's why it worked. That's why we have such a strong relationship."

How did you know Emily was the one? "When I saw her again that last time, after that year, I was so attracted to her, but I don't remember being attracted to her physically, it was something else, and that was a new experience for me. Normally, the looks are the entry point and that's how we're taught to date. I mean, look at Tinder. I'm sure it does good, but it's destroying the way we date, 'cause it's outside in versus inside out. I remember looking at Emily and just feeling something different. It's like I saw her soul and was like, 'Whoa! I need to be around her.' And it was much more of a spiritual connection than an animalistic connection and for me that was pretty transcendent." **ML**

Keep up with Justin on Twitter: @JustinBaldoni, Instagram: @JustinBaldoni, www.facebook.com/justinbaldoni, and http://wearewayfarer.com/

## BellyBump

The day of our interview, Justin had just released his new app, BellyBump, created with Travis Clark (*We the Kings*) and Travis Van Winkle (*The Last Ship*). When Emily was pregnant with Maiya, Justin wanted to create a time-lapse movie of her growing belly. But with him splitting his time between filming *Jane the Virgin* and running Wayfarer Entertainment, making this video was challenging." He picks up his iPhone to show me his app where pregnant mothers can easily document their progress and post customized videos to social media. "I called two of my buddies. 'I have a crazy idea and the marketing pitch is going to be Three Men and A Baby app. Let's do it!' They're like, 'We're in!' So we built it." *BellyBump* is available in the app store now.

## We Want More!

**What would fans be surprised to find out about you?**

That I love musicals [laughs]. I love musical theater but I can't sing. I'm literally a diehard fan of *Hamilton* and I haven't even seen it yet. I listen to the soundtrack every single day.

**What are you watching on TV?**

I'm watching *The Flash*, *Madam Secretary*, *Supergirl*. I watch *Billions* --very into *Billions* right now. I don't really have time to watch TV, but when I do, I either want to be taken away on a superhero adventure or I want to go deep into the world of *Billions* or *Homeland*.

**I remember you telling me in May that you'd like to appear on *The Flash*.**

I would love to be a guest star on *The Flash* (laughs).

**What kind of character would you want to play: good guy or bad guy?**

I'd love to play a good guy, but I'm happy to play a bad guy. I'd pretty much play anything. I'm a big fan of Grant's [Gustin] and Greg Berlanti's and everything that they're doing over there.

**Who are you listening to?**

I listen to Andy Grammer. I'm listening to the *Hamilton* soundtrack on repeat. And I listen to *Sleeping at Last* with my friend Ryan [O'Neal]. I like to listen to my friends. I have some really talented friends who are musicians.