

Daily Journal

OCTOBER 14, 2026

TOP BOUTIQUES IN CALIFORNIA 2026

CELEBRATING CALIFORNIA'S SMALL BUT MIGHTY SPECIALIZED LAW FIRMS



Donaldson
Callif Perez

CLEARANCE / IP

LOS ANGELES

Projects often reach Donaldson Callif Perez LLP after other firms have turned them away.

"Many of the projects that arrive on our desks have already been on the desks of other lawyers in town who either don't have our expertise, don't want to take the risk of empowering artists to do what is their right or don't want to take the time to think of creative solutions," said founding partner Lisa Callif. "We welcome the opportunity to take on such challenges and do what we can to make a project distributable and insurable."

Callif spent four years at Proskauer Rose LLP and three more as an associate to entertainment attorney Michael Donaldson before the two became partners. In 2008, they formed Donaldson + Callif in Los Angeles to represent filmmakers working outside the studio system on production,

rights clearances, fair use, financing and distribution. Chris Perez became a name partner in 2021, and the firm now has three equity partners, three non-equity partners and eight associates.

"Our firm specializes in representing independent producers and production companies in all aspects of content creation, including equity financing, production and distribution with extensive experience in fair use, copyright and personal rights issues," Perez said.

Callif and Perez run the firm day to day, while Donaldson sets its tone.

"We prioritize teamwork in our office and believe creating a positive and fun work environment is of paramount importance," Callif said. "We treat our clients in the same manner — including them in our decision-making process and creating relation-

ships with our clients that are positive and enjoyable."

She added, "One of our mottos is, 'everything is fixable;' either change the action or change the perspective."

Callif handled clearance for the HBO docuseries "Telemarketers," which follows two former employees of Civic Development Group, a New Jersey telemarketing company, through a 20-year investigation into charitable telemarketing and the money behind it.

"This docuseries presented a host of complicated legal issues that often were exacerbated because the 'investigators' were former telemarketing employees and engaged in a type of gonzo journalism — often making statements that weren't quite accurate, coming to conclusions that weren't quite supported," Callif said.

"Our job was to make sure the statements were accurate, while allowing the film to be what it was and document certain mistakes that were made. The project was released with no claims to date!"

Partner Alexandre Yousefzadeh conducted the clearance review for "It Couldn't Happen Here," a series from Bungalow Media.

"We review and advise our client on fair use, defamation and false light issues and with our collaboration, the series has contributed to certain convictions covered in the series being overturned and justice being restored for people falsely accused of crimes," he said.

Partner Dale Nelson said the firm serves as clearance counsel to HBO's "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver," advising production company Partially Important Productions on intellectual property and personal rights matters. The firm also handled clearance for "My NDA," a documentary on how nondisclosure agreements silence victims of abuse, assault and discrimin-

ation while protecting perpetrators and their employers. The film premiered at SXSW in 2026.

"The review involved some complex and sensitive personal rights issues," Nelson said.

The firm also cleared "Buddy," a horror-comedy satire from director Casper Kelly that premiered at the 2026 Sundance Film Festival.

On the transactional side, partner Madison Karsenty manages productions for clients including Hartbeat and MGX, where multiple deals often close at once and depend on one another. She said in-person relationships matter as budgets shrink, financing tightens and more people turn to AI for legal guidance.

"Our industry is small and tight-knit; we are often collaborating with the same attorneys/firms across multiple projects, and fostering personal connection is often what helps bring a particularly tricky or

adversarial deal across the finish line," Karsenty said. "Our firm champions the independent filmmaker, and I'm always proud to see a particularly tough project finally see the light of day and resonate with audiences."

Callif was named to the Forbes Top Attorneys list, and she and Perez appeared on Variety's Legal Impact Report. The firm plans to stay small.

"We are intentionally staying boutique-sized," Callif said. "We enjoy the culture we can have with a smaller office and want to stay nimble so we can serve our clients without having to deal with much bureaucracy."

Nelson said the work continues regardless of industry cycles.

"Film production in general has had its highs and lows in the past year, but independent films and documentaries continue to thrive because their creators are fueled by a passion to tell their stories," she said.