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Teneisha Bonner, lithe and joyful young dancer who was the star of the first West End hip hop show, 'Into the Hoods' – obituary

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Teneisha Bonner and Roger Davies in 'Into the Hoods' at the Novello Theatre, London Credit: Alamy

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Teneisha Bonner, who has died from breast cancer aged 37, was a rare female star in British street dance, a pivotal figure in the transfer of the gritty, macho underworld dance form of hip hop to mainstream theatre culture in the past dozen years.

Statuesque and superbly athletic, with a grace not usually associated with her male-dominated art form, Teneisha Bonner danced at both the Beijing and London Olympics closing ceremonies, and performed on tours for Kylie Minogue, Take That, will.i.am and other major pop stars.

But it was through her formative part in Kate Prince's ZooNation dance company, which brought street dance into the professional world, that Teneisha Bonner became "the prima ballerina of hip hop", in Prince's words.

In 2008 Teneisha Bonner's leading role in Kate Prince's *Into the Hoods*, the first street-dance show to reach the West End, made her a star. This was an irreverent urban take on Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods*, in which she played Spinderella, a hopeful girl DJ living on the Ruff Endz Estate, competing with lithe and joyful elegance in a macho world of pounding beats and aggressive posturing.



Teneisha Bonner in 'Into the Hoods', a ZooNation production, at the Novello Theatre Credit: Alastair Muir

Eye-catching in a gold croptop and sneakers, Bonner won hearts for her sweetness of character as well as awe for her dancing, which compellingly combined the opposites that can make street dance such an exciting spectator art.

She was an expert in locking and popping, the minutely articulated jerky movements that travel the length of the body, conjuring effects that were athletically sharp and yet fluid and dancerly. Her performance was named one of his top five career treats by the Observer dance critic Luke Jennings on his retirement.

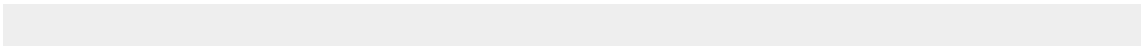
Born in St Catherine, Jamaica, on December 31 1981, Teneisha Phehoma Bonner was brought up by her grandmother until she went to London at the age of seven to join her mother, Yvette Singh, who had come to the UK to work as a nurse. Living with her mother and stepfather in a one-bedroom Peckham flat, young Teneisha started dancing at Brixton Recreation Centre, and at 13 was inspired to dream of a professional career by seeing the dance musical Cats.

After two years at the BRIT School for Performing Arts in Croydon, she joined the London Studio Centre's dance theatre course, initially paying the fees by taking television dancing jobs on the side. Within months the Centre's principal awarded her a full scholarship.



Teneisha Bonner took the risk of breaking off her training for a year to join the Swedish street-dance sensation, Bounce, on its extensive UK and European tour of *Insane in the Brain* (a hip hop version of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). But she decided to resume her course afterwards, graduating in 2004.

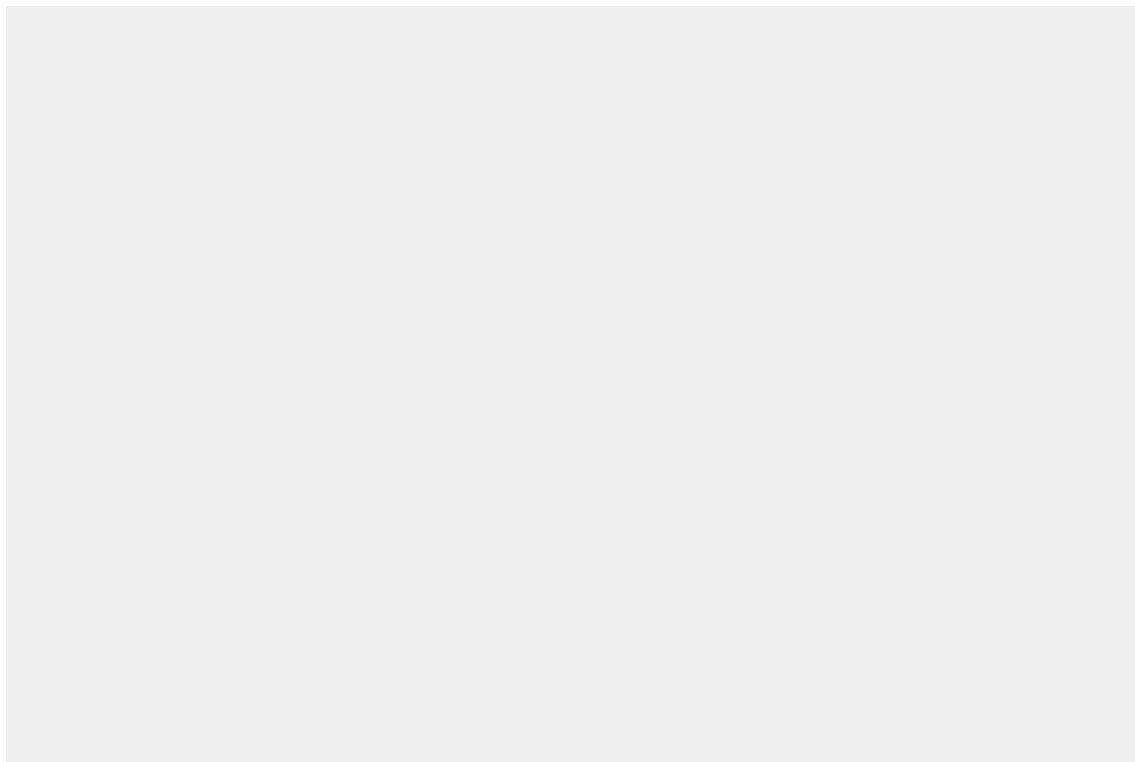
She quickly made a successful career in commercial dancing, performing in backing troupes for some of today's most famous pop artists, including two world tours with Kylie Minogue, and appearances with Rihanna, Take That, the Black-Eyed Peas and Alesha Dixon.



However, it was in her pioneering association with Kate Prince and ZooNation that Teneisha Bonner would emerge as a star in her own right.

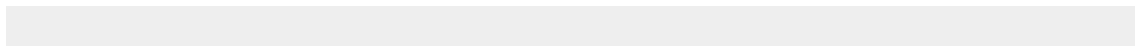
Kate Prince found in her a rare quality, in an art form oozing competitive testosterone: a woman who could stand shoulder to shoulder with the men, both in athleticism and charisma, and who could also carry a dramatic or comic character.

Into the Hoods, initially conceived in 2006 as a modest children's entertainment, was developed by Sadler's Wells Theatre into an Edinburgh Festival triumph and then a mould-breaking West End hit, which ran at the Novello Theatre for five months. Its success enabled ZooNation's consolidation into both a performing company and a training centre for street dance.



Teneisha Bonner as The Queen of Hearts in *The Mad Hatter's Tea Party*, 2016 Credit: Alice Pennefather

Teneisha Bonner's power and humorous versatility were key to Kate Prince's success in translating urban street dance into cheerfully exhilarating stage shows with family-friendly stories.



Retiring and gentle offstage, the dancer utterly transformed herself for her ZooNation roles, such as her moustachioed, cross-dressing Kerri in *Some Like It Hip Hop* (a reboot of Billy Wilder's film *Some Like It Hot*, with Kerri an upended version of the Tony Curtis character), for which she won a 2012 Critics' Circle dance award; there was also her terrifying Queen of Hearts in *The Mad Hatter's Tea Party* at the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio Theatre in 2014 and 2017, stalking the stage in a spectacular scarlet dress like "a long-limbed Grace Jones", said one reviewer.

Her career ranged widely. On stage she had featured roles in the Sadler's Wells dance musical *Shoes* (2010) and the 2013 Riverdance spin-off *Heartbeat of Home*.

She was also a sought-after video soloist in music videos as disparate as the British rapper Ty's EP *Kick Snare and an Idea* and the classical-crossover pianist Fabio D'Andrea's 2012 solo album *Reflection*, in which she danced with Zen calm to Chopin and Satie, draped in flowing gowns.

On the big screen she proved an adept actress as well as dancer in her prominent role as the hairdresser Shawna in the 2010 feelgood comedy, *StreetDance 3D*, a BBC and UK Film Council co-production that capitalised on the new craze for street dance with a story about a hip hop crew whose troubles are resolved by friendship with a ballet school.



Charlotte Rampling played the supportive ballet teacher, and the story culminated with showdowns involving dancers discovered on Britain's *Got Talent: Diversity*, *Flawless* and George Sampson. Bonner's dancing roles in last year's releases *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again* and *Mary Poppins Returns* were her final professional appearances.


Teneisha Bonner's short but packed career testified to a singular work ethic, and in *Being a Dancer: Advice from Dancers and Choreographers*, a collection of interviews with Lyndsey Winship, she emphasised the focused determination essential to making a living in her art form. "Being a dancer is uncomfortable," she observed. "Whichever way you approach it, the common denominator is pain."

A member of the Kensington Temple Pentecostal church in Notting Hill, she was diagnosed with breast cancer three years ago but kept it private, continuing to work, teaching at ZooNation and assisting Kate Prince in television and other work. *Some Like It Hip Hop* returns to the West End next week.

Teneisha Bonner is survived by her mother and four siblings.

Teneisha Bonner, born December 31 1981, died September 11 2019

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