

theatre alibi



You Can't Catch Me!
how we turned Michael Rosen's poems into theatre

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Introduction

Hello! I'm Henry Hawkes, director of ***You Can't Catch Me***, and in this booklet I'm going to be telling you the story of how Michael Rosen's poems were transformed into a show that will be seen by ten thousand children across Devon... and beyond!



For the last eleven years I've either acted in or directed the Theatre Alibi children's show and every year I find watching the show come together fantastically interesting. So, when I was asked to write this booklet, I thought what a great opportunity to tell you about it.

When we talk to children like you after our shows there are lots of questions about how long we had to learn our lines, how we chose the

stories, or who made the props. I hope I can answer some of those questions here.

'Less is more' is a catch-phrase we often use during rehearsals so without further ado...



Why did we choose Michael Rosen poems?

When Theatre Alibi started taking theatre into schools 21 years ago we began by using traditional stories and fables, and later started writing new stories especially for each show.

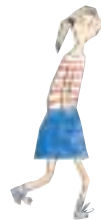
Each year we build the show around a central idea or theme. Last year, for instance, all the stories were about an old teapot. Who used to use it? What had it seen? How did it get cracked? And why was it buried? Other themes in previous years have included the sea, time, the night before Christmas, riddles and the Isles of Scilly.

Then we thought, why not try something different? Why not try a whole show using published, modern stories that children might have read and enjoyed.

So, two years ago Daniel Jamieson, who has been an actor, Artistic Director and writer for Theatre Alibi, was sent off to Exeter Children's Library in search of some possibilities...back he came, very excited, with a stack of Michael Rosen's poetry books. And Annemarie, who works in our office, got very excited too, saying that she'd read his poems to her children when they were young and that he'd become a firm family favourite.

But hang on a minute, we're storytellers: we turn **stories** into theatre, would it work with **poetry**?

Well, there's nothing we like better than a challenge...



And of course the wonderful thing about Michael Rosen's poems is their strong narrative quality. All the poems are 'told' by Michael, he's the narrator. On top of that they also contain something that's vital in any piece of theatre - lots of action! In fact they're jam-packed with incidents and accidents, anecdotes and adventures, with plenty of annoyed adults thrown in for good measure. They're all written with such warmth and humour that we felt sure they would make a great show.



Michael Rosen it was then!

Things to do

Can you think of a poem or story which would make a good show? Look out for one that you really like, with lots of action. If you can imagine seeing and hearing it, it's probably a good choice. Try acting it out.

How did we decide which poems to use?

First of all we got in contact with Michael Rosen and asked him about the possibility of using his poems. He was very enthusiastic and supportive of the idea. Once we had the green light, we decided that Dan should read as many poems as he could, make a selection and put them in an order that could be used in the show.

I asked Dan how he went about choosing which poems to use.

"Er...well...let me see if I can remember...I went through all the Michael Rosen books and wrote a list in my notebook of every poem I liked and a little reason why. I tried to write down the flavour of each poem as well. Then I looked back through all the poems and tried to recognise things that kept coming up or connected the poems together."



What came up?

"I suppose it was what being a child felt like. Michael Rosen was trying to remember his own childhood and to understand his son, Eddie, to see what it feels like to be a child."

How did you choose which order to put the poems in?

"It seems very clear in the poems what time of day they take place. There are poems before breakfast, bedtime poems, school- break poems...and every bit of the day has a different flavour. So I had the idea to put them roughly in the order of the day."

Were there any poems you really liked but couldn't fit in?

"If we'd put in all the poems I liked, the show would've been two hours long. 'Parcel' and 'Quick Let's Get Out Of Here' are two I really liked but just couldn't fit in."

'Which is your favourite poem in the show and why?

'Chocolate Cake', because it's full of funny action. I love the joy of it, the excitement, the risk of being caught, the naughtiness! I can really imagine it - the unbridled joy of eating cake in the middle of the night, getting caught and not being wily or clever enough to get away with it."

Things to do

Choose your favourite Michael Rosen poem. It might be from the show, or one you've read. What is it you really like about it?

What did we like about the poems?

The poet Adrian Mitchell's comment that "the reason that most people ignore most poetry is because most poetry ignores most people" doesn't apply to Michael Rosen's poems.

Michael is one of those rare adults who really remembers what it's like to be a child. He remembers how scrapes you find yourself in make complete sense to you, and no sense whatsoever to the adults around you. That definitely rang a bell for all of us.

On the first day of rehearsals, after reading Dan's script, we all sat round with a large sheet of paper and a big black marker and began to record our thoughts and feelings about the poems. What had been our first impressions, what had we liked, what were we confused by, were there any pictures or ideas that came to mind? We could all identify with go-kart building and furniture gymnastics and were soon telling each other stories of our own death-defying antics.

What really appealed to me was the way Michael Rosen captures little details of family life. The way a brother can really wind you up, Mum's funny comments, or the quirky eating habits of your Dad.



I felt inspired to have a go at writing a poem myself and came up with the one below.

Michael Rosen makes great use of common everyday language (it's called the vernacular by people who don't like using common everyday language).

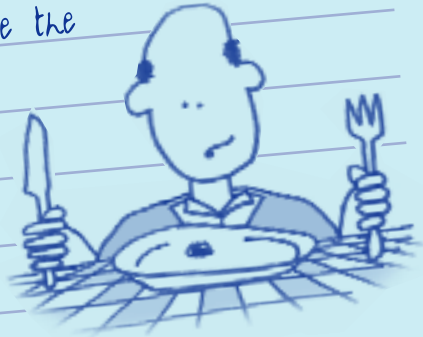
My Dad always leaves the last mouthful of food on his plate. And my Mum always says "You always leave the last mouthful", no matter how much I give you, you always leave the last mouthful.

It's true!

No matter how much she gives him, he always leaves the last

mouthful and she always says "You always leave the last mouthful, no matter how much I give you, you always leave the last mouthful".

I often wonder what would happen if she served him a plate with just one mouthful.



Things to do

Have a go at making up your own poems! You suddenly realise that the odd things in family life can be a great source of material for poetry. Or you could ask an adult you know well for some of their childhood memories to turn into poems.

If you do, listen closely to the way they tell their stories. Try to capture any strange sayings, or funny turns of phrase and include them in your poems.

Think of ways to show the poems on the page that emphasise the meaning or rhythm. Did you notice that the word 'mouthful' was on its own at the end of each paragraph in my poem? Just like the abandoned morsel on my Dad's plate!

Look at one of the poems in the show, *Me & My Brother*, which is in a book called THE HYPNOTISER. The layout of the poem makes you read it like a Dad!



How did we decide to come to your school?

You asked us, is the simple answer!

I mentioned Annemarie MacDonald earlier. She is one of the people who work in our office. Every year it's her job to create eye-catching publicity for our shows. She has to design what we call 'the flyers', and these get sent, not just to your school, but to every school in Devon.



Each year Annemarie throws open the office window and cackles "Fly my pretties, fly!" and the winged monkeys leap forth in search of fresh schools...

Not really. The flyers do go out to every school but they are in fact a booking form. I've included one with this pack for you to have a look at. Its purpose is to catch the eye of a teacher, give them information about the show and persuade them to book it for you to see.

This year we used a Quentin Blake drawing as the illustration for our publicity. When we got to designing the poster we asked Quentin Blake to send us the original.

It arrived by Recorded Delivery and Annemarie carefully opened the package. We all gathered round and there it was - an actual, real drawing by Quentin Blake! We could see each stroke of his ink pen, his hand must have rested on that cartridge paper. It was only 15cm long and 15cm high and worth £1,000!

Unfortunately, for us, he'd drawn it exactly to fit the cover of a book (Quick Let's Get Out Of Here by Michael Rosen) and all the characters had feet missing. But we needed feet to make the poster look good.

Annemarie had the idea of asking Joe, our Graphic Designer, to use his computer to draw in the missing feet. He used Quentin Blake's style of drawing as a guide. I've put the pictures from the flyer and poster on page 26 so that you can see the finished effect. You'd never guess, would you?

Things to do

Why don't you have a go at designing or drawing a flyer? It could be for our show, or for an imaginary one of your own. Remember, teachers have a lot of paperwork to wade through, so your flyer has got to stand out. It's got to make your teacher say, "YES! I WANT THIS SHOW IN OUR SCHOOL!"

Who helped make the show?

I've counted 17 people who've helped to make **You Can't Catch Me**.

The show has four actors, a musician, a director (me), a Musical Director (because I'm not known for my musical skills) and two stage managers (because the first one was getting married and going on honeymoon). There was a designer, an assistant designer (who made the Eddie puppet), a prop maker, a set maker and a set painter... AND there are three people in the office whose job is to run Theatre Alibi all year round.

Theatre Alibi has a large group of experienced and dedicated people to choose from, although we also love working with new people who bring different skills and fresh ideas. In this year's cast both Dan and Derek have worked on lots of our shows, whereas Leonie, Steve and Tim (who takes over from Steve halfway through the tour) were chosen from auditions. An audition is when we meet new actors and choose a few that we'd like to work with.

Many of the people we work with have been in theatre for years and years (Dan, Leonie, Steve and Derek have 54 years experience between them). But we also like to work with people who are just starting out. For

Sarah (who's playing the Marimba), this is one of her first jobs in theatre.



How did we design the set, props and costumes?

Five weeks before the rehearsals started, everyone who was going to be involved with *You Can't Catch Me* got together for what we call the R&D week. It stands for Research and Development - it's just a fancy name for trying out the script to see how it works.

Everybody thinks of ways to turn what's on the page into theatre. Lots of ideas come up, some of them are **BRILLIANT** and some of them are **REALLY TERRIBLE**. But it doesn't matter how bad an idea might sound, we give it a go anyway with great enthusiasm.

This is very important.

Feeling free to make mistakes means that no one is worrying about getting it perfect first time. Everyone is relaxed and more creative. In fact, most of the best ideas are happy accidents that happen when we're trying out an idea that isn't working very well.

For example, we were trying to find an elegant way to bring on a table and four chairs (and failing) when someone asked, "Do we really need to have a table?" So, we tried it without, and that looked a bit empty... And then someone said "How about just a tablecloth?" It looked great, it was funny AND it was quick to bring on. We kept the idea in.



Part of the reason for trying out the script is so that we can see what the set needs to do. Whether we need different levels to stand on, whether actors need somewhere to hide behind or even, do we really need a table and four chairs?

And all the while Jenny Saunt, our designer, is sitting in the corner of the room, drawing. She's watching what we're doing and sketching ideas for the set. She's also thinking about the costumes and making a list of all the props we mention.

Once the R&D week is over she has three weeks to come up with a final design for the set. She makes a model and draws a detailed plan with precise measurements for the set-maker to follow. But a set design is more than just levels, places to hide and whether we need a table and four chairs.

It has to be a part of the storytelling too...

I spoke to Jenny and asked her how she went about designing the show.

"A very good starting point is to think of a memorable picture for each of the poems, Michael creeping down the stairs in the chocolate cake story, for instance. The pictures should try to capture your feeling of the world that the story is set in. I then do little sketches of those pictures, spread them all out over the floor and try to find any links. So, for instance, in this show I got a strong sense of a child's view of the world, a child's perspective of the house and its furniture, which is very different from an adult's perspective.

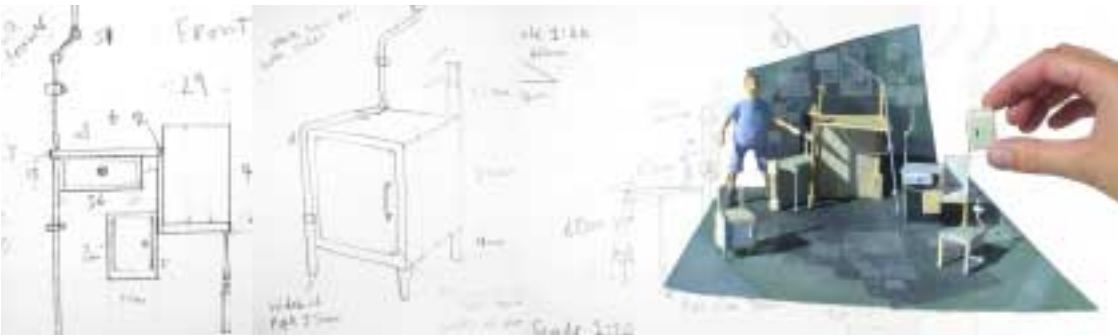
The next thing I did was go and look for pictures and photographs (I went to the library) to see what things looked like in the 1950's when Michael was a boy. What the furniture looked like, what the style of decoration was, how everyday objects were different and also what people were wearing. I also wanted to see what it looked like outside in the 1950's, especially where Michael grew up in north London.



Unlike lots of stories, these poems have no detailed descriptions of where they take place, so I had to do the leg work!

Once I had enough information I let it all cook, went to bed early, got up at 6am in the morning and sat for a long time with my eyes closed. Then I drew a picture of the set. Had to trust my instincts, really! Then I made a model based on the picture.

The reason I love designing is because you get to make the whole picture, down to all the details. And I get to do lots of shopping, and making stuff! It's such fun that it doesn't feel like a job at all."



Things to do

Why not have a go at designing a set yourself. Choose a story or poem that you like and have a go at drawing a set, or building a model for it. Think about where and when the story is set. You might like to look at pictures in books and magazines to help you with your ideas. Draw some sketches first and then try drawing your set or making a model. Some useful things to make models with are: cardboard and plasticine as well as odds and ends like bottle-tops, scraps of fabric and different size boxes.

How did we decide which musical instrument to use

You may have noticed that we're touring with a marimba! I asked Ian Wellens, the Musical Director, about the decision to use this amazing instrument.



"Well, the marimba is the big brother of the xylophone. It originally came from Africa. Most primary school classes have a xylophone, so it's something everyone recognises but may not have seen on this scale.

I was trying to think of instruments that evoked the 1950s. And a xylophone is something you hear in cartoons like 'Tom and Jerry' from that era. It's got a lively, comic feel. And since we were trying to recreate an exuberant world of scrapes and adventures, that instrument seemed to fit.

But the marimba has the possibility of being a deeper, more resonant instrument than a xylophone. It can make warm, thick, glowing sounds depending on the sticks you use and how hard the keys are struck. So it's got a great range.

Sometimes the music can create pace and energy, like when the go-karts are whizzing down hill. At other times we can use the marimba to go with the emotions of a character. There's a particular piece of music I was able to write for the scene when Michael is beginning to remember his childhood - his home and family. It's warm and familiar, it... echoes like memory. The marimba's ideal for that, as well as reflecting comic action as in, say, the Gymnastics poem."

We had to just hope the instrument would fit in your school hall!

Things to do

Imagine you're the composer for a show. Think about what sort of music you might choose to go with some of these things:

- * an exciting car chase
- * a creeping cat
- * a lazy picnic at the beach on a hot sunny day

Would your music be high or low, fast or slow, loud or soft? What instrument might it be played on? Listening to some recorded music might help you decide.

How did we rehearse the show?

While you were enjoying your summer holidays we had just FOUR WEEKS to turn the poems on the page into the show you've seen. Four weeks before we visited our first school and performed the show in front of a real, live audience. Scary!

We began by working slowly through each poem. Fixing any of the ideas that worked and deciding things like who comes on from which direction, where a scene might take place or where a prop is stored.

Each of the scenes in each of the poems we repeated twenty, thirty, forty times (no joke!). Every time we did the scene, we made a slight change to try and make it better. And then we did it again. On and on until we were happy with it. The actors ended up with very frazzled brains, but I showed them no mercy.

Each moment on stage was carefully planned so that everyone knew exactly what everyone else was doing. For instance, Dan and Steve knew that they couldn't rush the beginning of the go-kart story because Derek was behind the screen changing costume from Brian to Big Tony. And the scene where we move all the furniture around before indoor gymnastics would have been chaos otherwise. Everyone must be totally aware of everyone else. Learning their moves was just as important as learning their lines!

Things to do

This is a really good game to make you aware of what everyone around you is doing. Try getting your whole class to walk around in the hall without bumping into each other. Carry on walking but now do it in half the hall, a quarter, an eighth, a sixteenth. See how small you can make the space with everyone still moving around safely and smoothly.

Often, when we needed new ideas for a scene, the actors put their scripts down and told the poems in their own words. Because they were doing the scenes from memory they would add in things that weren't originally written. For example that's how Steve got the idea of holding up a washing-up brush and kitchen tap in *Chocolate Cake*.

Things to do

Have a go at telling a Michael Rosen poem or favourite story of yours from memory. In what way is it different from the poem or story in the book? Which bits did you leave out and which bits did you go into in more detail?

One of the things we spent a lot of time on in rehearsals was how to move the Eddie puppet so that he seemed like a real little boy. It's not easy and it took lots of practice. Leonie used a mirror to see precisely what the Eddie puppet looked like at any given moment. She knew that if he stopped looking 'real' for a single moment, then the illusion might be broken!



Things to do

Try using a puppet that you've made or found. The secret with puppets is to exaggerate everything. Every look or gesture can be bigger, don't hold back! Just like Leonie did, use a mirror to help you. And make the moves sharp! Move the puppet from one position to another: a look, a pause, a tilt of the head. Each position represents a different expression or emotion.

The last thing to remember with most puppets is that their eyes don't move (obvious, really), so that if you want your puppet to look directly at something you have to point the whole head in that direction. It's the only way the audience can tell what the puppet's looking at.

You or your teacher can find ways of making puppets on our website in the Teacher's Notes for last year's show, Teapot.

([www.theatrealibi.co.co.uk/education/past children's shows/Teapot](http://www.theatrealibi.co.co.uk/education/past%20children's%20shows/Teapot))

Click on the education pack and scroll down to the section called *Make Your Own Puppets*.

Rehearsals are not just about going over and over scenes or practicing puppet moves. We also get to play games! Games are not only fun, they are vital for flexing our creative muscles.

It's always good to learn new games, so I thought I'd share two of our favourite ones with you.

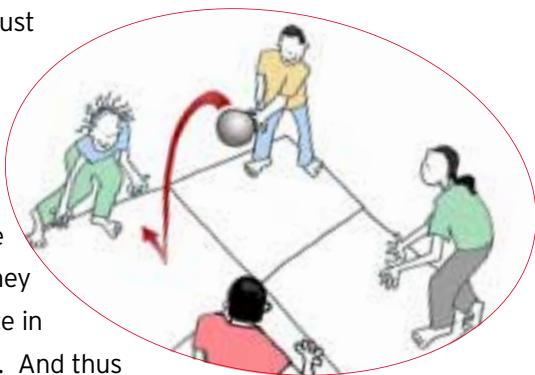
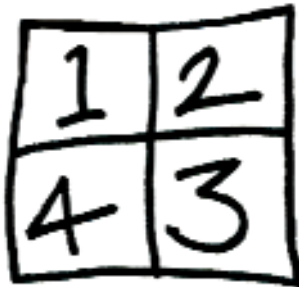
Game One

I don't know if this game's got a proper name, but we call it 'Four Squash'.

First of all you need to mark out a square on the floor four metres long and four metres wide (we use electrical tape, ask your teacher to get hold of some). Then divide this big square into four equal squares and number them clockwise 1, 2, 3 and 4. You now need a large, soft, spongy ball (again ask your teacher, and don't take no for an answer).

One person stands in each of the squares and the rest of the players form an orderly line outside the big square.

How to play: the person in box number 1 always serves. To serve, you let the ball bounce once, and only once, then hit the ball with the palm of your hand Upwards. The ball must then bounce in any one of the other three squares. The person in whose square the ball has just bounced must then hit the ball, again with the palm of their hand Upwards. They also must get the ball to bounce in one of the other three squares. And thus



You are disqualified if:

- a) The ball bounces twice in your square before you hit it.
- b) You hit the ball before it bounces in your square.
- c) You hit the ball too far and it fails to land in any square.

Once you are disqualified the game stops while you leave the big square and join the end of the orderly line. The person at the beginning of the orderly line then steps into box number 4 and everyone in the other boxes move up one box, from 4 to 3, 3 to 2, and 2 to 1. Number 1 then serves and the game starts again.

If the ball bounces on a line, the orderly queue decides who was disqualified, so you have to watch closely.

Game Two

This game definitely gets our brains warmed-up. We haven't got a name for it. Perhaps you could make one up!

Anyway, everyone stands in a circle and begins the rhythm. The rhythm is to slap your thighs, clap your hands, click your fingers on one hand, then click your fingers on the other hand, then slap your thighs and clap your hands and so on. Once you've got the rhythm going, the game can begin.

Round 1: Each person takes it in turn to say a word (one syllable) as they click fingers on one hand, and a different word as they click the fingers on the other. For example DOG and BOAT, and the next person might say EAR and MOON. (*easy*)

Round 2: Each person then has to rhyme their first word with the last word from the person before them in the circle. For example BOX and FLEA might then be followed by TREE and MOUSE. (*hmm, a little more tricky*)

Round 3: This time you rhyme with the last word of the person before you and then think of a word that associates or connects to that rhyme. For example *house/door, sore/feet, greet/smile, pile/up, cup/plate* etc, all while sticking to the slap, clap, click, click rhythm. *(really hard, possibly resulting in brain melt-down)*

....And all the while in between the games, the practicing and the puppets, Jenny and her production team were buzzing around buying props, making mock-up props, making real props, re-making props, sawing cans of corned beef in half (!), fitting and adjusting costumes, painting the set, the floor cloth and the backdrop, adding hooks and pockets and creating secret compartments for fake chocolate cake...ah hah, that's how he did it!

Until finally the show began to come together. We had a couple of dress rehearsals, packed the van, got a good night's sleep and were off on tour!



Where do we tour to?

After the flyers were sent out we had 142 schools reply asking for our show! That's more than double the number of schools we could go to, so we had to make some difficult decisions about who to visit and who to leave out this year. Altogether, we're going to perform the show 93 times. Imagine that!



During the week we travel all over Devon, sometimes doing two shows in one school and sometimes going to two different schools each day. We often have cold, dark, early starts but driving through golden country lanes as autumn settles is just bliss.

On a Saturday we perform the show, not in a school but in a theatre. And these are all over the South West from Bridport in Dorset to Penzance in Cornwall. We're also taking the show to the Tricycle Theatre in London.

Well, that's the end of the story. I hope that you enjoyed it and that it answered some of those questions. I hope you enjoyed the show too - we certainly had lots of fun making it.



Now, I'm off,
you can't catch me!
Until next time...
GOODBYE!

Things to do

Try writing a review of the show as if it was for a newspaper. We'd love to see it if you can send it to us. I've included a newspaper review of last year's show *Teapot*, to give you an idea of the style.

A Play for All Ages

by Frank Ruhrmund

The Cornishman

The Acorn in Penzance was the last venue in a long tour by Exeter-based company Theatre Alibi of its latest production *Teapot*, and it must have been pleased both by the size of the audience it attracted and the reactions it received.

Deemed suitable for 5-10 year olds, in the event it was difficult to discern who enjoyed it most, the children or the grown-ups.

Speaking as a growing boy, I can only say that I loved every second of it. Written by Daniel Jamieson, the plot revolved gently around the discovery of an old earth-covered teapot in a turnip patch, the reasons for it being there, and all that happened to it, not to mention its magical qualities.

Begun in time-honoured fashion with "One fine morning", the play's three stories – the attempts of the farm cat to see the top of the moon, the truth behind the chipping of the teapot's spout, and the search for a recipe for success – were extremely well told.

The company is proud of its storytelling abilities and this production, neatly directed by Nikki Sved, certainly places it firmly and squarely in the front rank of contemporary storytellers.

With the help of music, composed and performed by Harry Napier, plus assorted puppets, the three performers – Jordan Whyte, Henry Hawkes and Daniel Jamieson – slipped in and out of costume, mainly hats, accent and character, with the speed of light and were dazzling.

Just as the recipe for success consisted of hard work, true grit and bitter determination before culminating in sweet enjoyment, so did their performances. However, as splendid as they were, they suffered the fate of all actors who go up against animals and were upstaged by Blinky the cat who, despite the fact that he was only a puppet, but one of the finest feline puppets I've seen, and helped unselfishly by Henry Hawkes, stole the show.

How can you get your hands on some Michael Rosen poems

Well, you can go to your local library, or maybe your school has some. You can also get books from your local bookshop, or through the internet by logging on to www.amazon.com and searching for Michael Rosen. Here's a list of the poems in our show and which book they're in. But there are lots of other wonderful poems and books that Michael's written.

Quick Lets Get Out of Here!

Eddie & the Wallpaper

(extract: Michael Finnegan)

Mrs Townsend

Gymnastics

Chocolate Cake

Go Kart

Eddie & The Shreddies

You Wait Till I'm Older Than You

Eddie & the Supermarket

Who Started It?

The Line

You Can't Catch Me!

You Can't Catch Me, Grumblebelly!

Shoes

The Hypnotiser

Me & My Brother

Hot Food

Mind Your Own Business

Some Call Him Rover

The Santa Fe

Best of Michael Rosen

Tricks

Alone

Mind the Gap

Mother

Another thing you could look at..

An interview with Michael about himself and how he writes.

www.mystworld.com/youngwriter/author/michael_rosen

